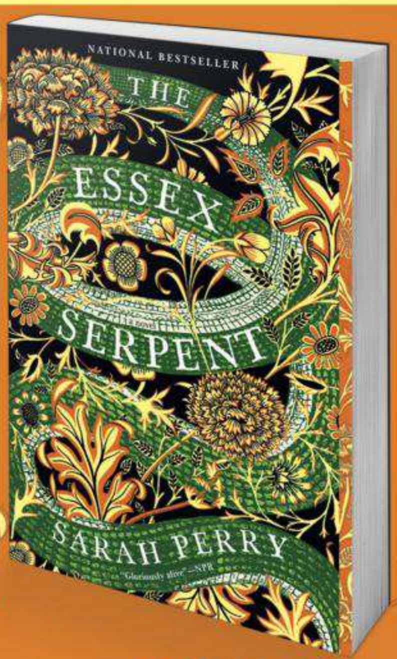
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THE NEW YORKER

MAY 7, 2018




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DRAWINGS *Avi Steinberg, Liana Finck, Frank Cotham, Pia Guerra, Tom Cheney, Bruce Eric Kaplan, Zachary Kanin, Roz Chast, Charlie Hankin, David Sipress, Kendra Allenby, Harry Bliss* SPOTS *Janne Iivonen*

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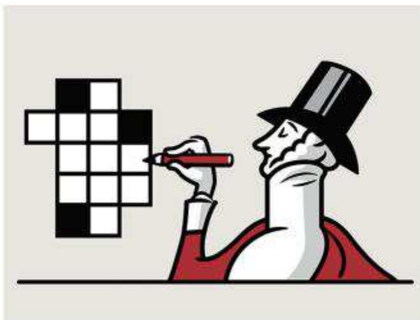
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LEFT: QIN CHEN; RIGHT: CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

THE MAIL

LOST IN SPACE

Dan Chiasson, in his article on "2001: A Space Odyssey," seems to doubt that young people will be interested in carrying on the decades-long debate about the film's meanings after watching it "on a palm-size device" ("Anybody There?," April 23rd). A few years ago, I went with a group of my fellow-millennials to a screening of "2001" at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery, where the film was projected onto the side of a massive mausoleum. The crowd was young, and the mood was festive: people had dressed up, and had space-themed picnics and generally nerded out. We discussed the film long after the Uber trip home. Our generation may be known for our memes, as Chiasson suggests, but we're also thirsty for analysis and criticism. After an episode of the HBO series "Westworld" airs, there are dozens of essays online about meaning, plot theories, and technical aspects of the show. The AMC series "The Walking Dead" is followed by "Talking Dead," in which commentators break down the latest episode's contents. I watch it in surround sound, on my sixty-inch screen.
Matthew Brown
South Pasadena, Calif.

To answer a question posed by Stanley Kubrick in "2001"—"Anybody there?"—yes, I was there. During my fifth viewing, in 1968, TMA-1 (the lunar monolith) spoke to me. It said: Forget plot. Forget chronology. Forget endings. Embrace mystery. Embrace collaboration. Embrace voicelessness. Embrace sonorousness. It was an extraterrestrial calling card from the future.
Bill Younglove
Lakewood, Calif.

Chiasson doesn't discuss the soundtrack of "2001," but no filmmaker has used classical music more effectively than Kubrick did, and the music is as central to the film as its visuals are. At the start of the movie, the sun, the moon, and Earth align as the bold opening sequence of Richard Strauss's "Also Sprach Zarathustra" plays. Johann Strauss's "Blue Danube" waltz turns the long space-station docking sequence into a graceful galactic ballet. Excerpts from György Ligeti's haunting "Requiem," with its dense, dissonant clusters of voices and instruments, accompany the appearances of the monoliths.
Walter Frisch
New York City

Chiasson mentions that "Kubrick binged on pulp sci-fi as a child," but he doesn't say that the story that Kubrick adapted first appeared in a pulp magazine with a whip-fetishist cover. Arthur C. Clarke's "Sentinel of Eternity" was in the spring, 1951, issue of *10 Story Fantasy*. It was the magazine's only issue, and contained thirteen stories, including Clarke's cerebral and thought-provoking work.
Richard Bleiler
Willington, Conn.

LIFE IN THE BORDERLANDS

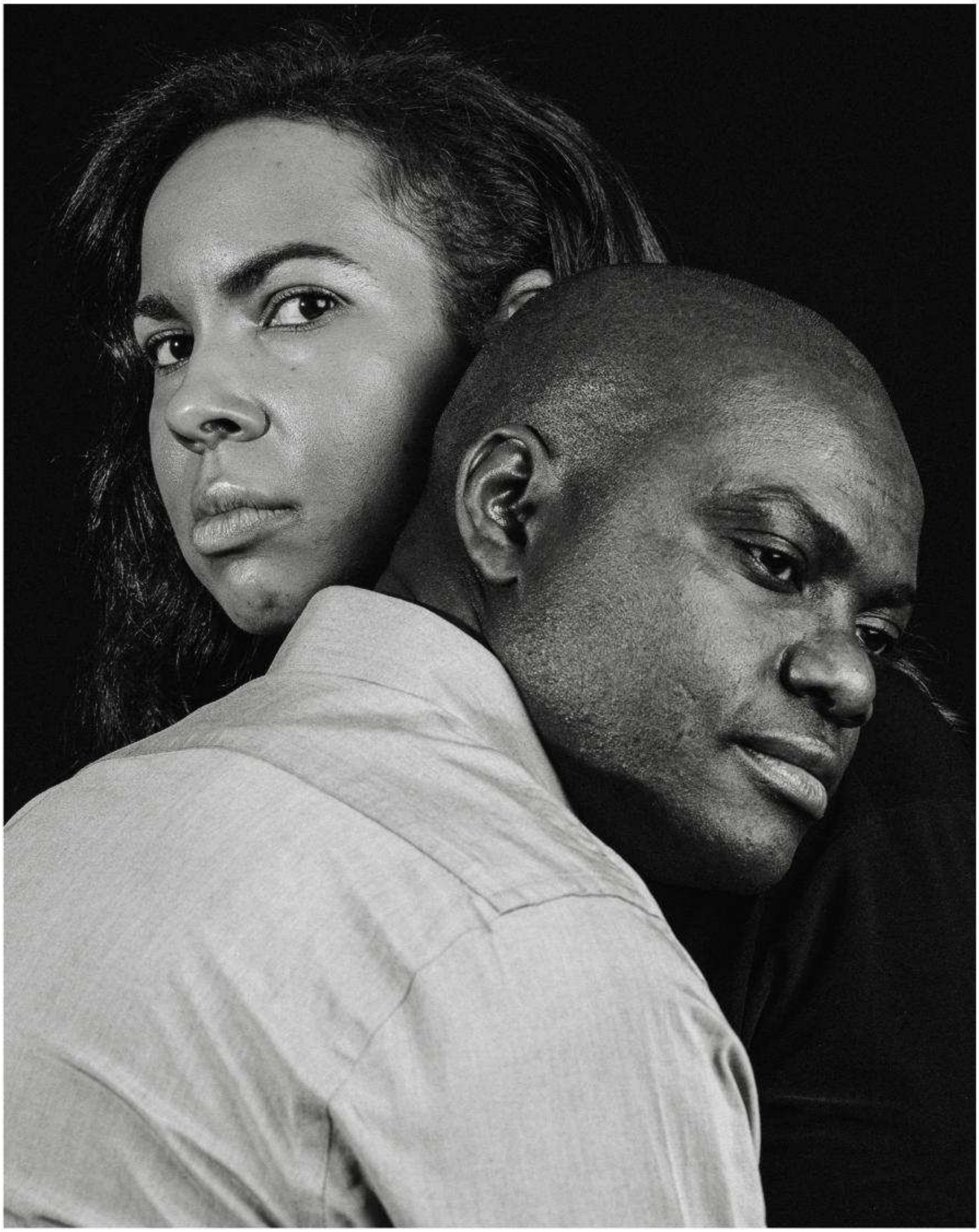
Nick Paumgarten's travelogue about rafting the Rio Grande winds through issues such as conservation and immigration ("Water and the Wall," April 23rd). To many people, the borderlands—the liminal space between the United States and Mexico, where Donald Trump wants to build a wall—seem like a playground, complete with seismic sensors, clients, and guides. But the borderlands are much more, especially for the migrants in search of opportunity, and for the animals and plants in dire need of protection if they are to survive. The Department of Homeland Security, with its contractors and test holes, will never understand that the borderlands represent an in-between-ness that should be not fenced off but, rather, respected.
Kevin Calderón
Los Angeles, Calif.

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MAY 2 – 8, 2018

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



In Beethoven's only opera, **"Fidelio,"** a heroic woman risks all to save her husband from wrongful incarceration. Heartbeat Opera's new production, which opens at Baruch Performing Arts Center on May 3, updates the story: Florestan, the captive, is now a Black Lives Matter activist named Stan; the indomitable Leonora becomes a prison guard, Lee; and the famous "Prisoners' Chorus" has been recorded by six Midwestern prison choirs. The American soprano Kelly Griffin and the Angolan tenor Nelson Ebo play the faithful couple.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MAMADI DOUMBOUYA

CLASSICAL MUSIC

OPERA

Metropolitan Opera
Opera audiences and directors can be jaded when it comes to embellished plots. Often, Puccini's **"Tosca"**—a psychosexual thriller that ends with the grisly deaths of a famous opera singer, her paramour, and the police chief who tries to blackmail her—barely raises an eyebrow. But, in the current revival of David McVicar's darkly elegant production, Michael Volle's Scarpia restores some of the opera's impact, twisting the gnarled vines of his infatuation and brutality around his prey with suffocating force. Anna Netrebko, somewhat tentative in her role début as the fiery Roman diva, can still captivate the audience with a lusciously voiced phrase, while her real-life husband, the Azerbaijani tenor Yusif Eyvazov, brings a rich, though monochromatic, sound as Cavaradossi. The conductor Bertrand de Billy coaxes remarkably clear sonorities from Puccini's action-packed score. *May 4 at 8 and May 8 at 7:30.* • **Also playing:** A revival of Mary Zimmerman's staging of Donizetti's **"Lucia di Lammermoor"** features Pretty Yende and Michael Fabiano as the opera's volatile lovers; Roberto Abbado. *May 2 at 7:30 and May 5 at 8.* • In Laurent Pelly's charming storybook production of Massanet's **"Cendrillon,"** Joyce DiDonato sings the title role, flanked by fellow mezzo-sopranos Stephanie Blythe and Alice Coote; de Billy. *May 3 at 8 and May 7 at 7:30.* • Bartlett Sher's production of Gounod's **"Roméo et Juliette"** brings a satisfying simulacrum of Verona to life. Ailyn Pérez and Charles Castronovo play the doomed romantics; Plácido Domingo. *May 5 at 1. (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)*

Bronx Opera: "Der Freischütz"
While a host of younger opera outfits have pledged to make the art form more accessible with stripped-down productions in informal settings, the fifty-one-year-old company takes a more straightforward approach, presenting operas in English translation. This time, it's Carl Maria von Weber's deftly orchestrated exemplar of the early-Romantic German tradition, staged by Benjamin Spierman. Eric Kramer and Michael Spierman split conducting duties. *May 5 at 7:30 and May 6 at 2:30. (Lovinger Theatre, Lehman College, 250 Bedford Park Blvd. W., the Bronx. bronxopera.org.)*

Experiments in Opera: "And Here We Are"
The indie opera company, which has a taste for unusual original works, mounts a ninety-minute shadow-puppet opera by Matthew Welch. The chamber-size work deploys the plaintive wail of a muted trumpet to tell the true story of the composer's great-uncle, who was interned at a Japanese prison camp in the Philippines during the Second World War; Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew directs, and Welch conducts the ensembles Blarvuster and Mantra Percussion. *May 6 at 7. (National Sawdust, 80 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. nationalsawdust.org.)*

MasterVoices: "Orphic Moments"
Gluck's Classical-era "Orfeo ed Euridice," one of the defining tellings of the Orpheus myth, is paired with Matthew Aucoin's "The Orphic Moment," a cantata that conjures a shimmering yet slippery world in which the protagonist cannot find his footing as he emerges from Hades. Zack Winokur's production stars the incisive singers Anthony Roth Costanzo and Kiera Duffy; Ted Sperling conducts the Orchestra of St. Luke's and the MasterVoices chorus. *May 6 at 8:30 and May 7 at 7. (Rose Theatre, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500.)*

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

New York Philharmonic
The violinist and sometime conductor Nikolaj Znaider delivers his robust interpretation of Sibelius's passionate Violin Concerto, under the baton of Manfred Honeck, himself a former violist. The concerto is flanked by two dramatic suites for orchestra: Honeck's own arrangement of Dvořák's "Rusalka," and Tchaikovsky's music for the ballet "Sleeping Beauty," some of it familiar from the Disney movie. *May 3 at 7:30, May 4 at 11 A.M., May 5 at 8, and May 8 at 7:30. (David Geffen Hall. 212-875-5656.)*

London Symphony Orchestra
Simon Rattle has been closely associated with Mahler's music throughout his distinguished conducting career. It feels appropriate, then, that his first New York appearances as music director of the L.S.O. should concentrate on that composer's last three orchestral works, presented in sequence: the epic Ninth Symphony, the sublime song cycle "Das Lied von der Erde" (with two noble soloists, the tenor Stuart Skelton and the baritone Christian Gerhaher), and the anguished, unfinished Tenth Symphony, as completed by Deryck Cooke. *May 4 at 8; May 6 at 3; May 7 at 8. (David Geffen Hall. 212-721-6500.)*

Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra
During his conducting career, Mariss Jansons has recorded every one of Mahler's completed symphonies. Here, he leads the highly respected, Munich-based orchestra in the mighty Seventh. *May 5 at 8. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800.)*

Oratorio Society of New York: "Sanctuary Road" and "We Are One"
Kent Tritle leads the venerable chorus in two world premières, at Carnegie Hall. First, the composer Paul Moravec and the librettist Mark Campbell, both Pulitzer Prize winners, tell the stories of escaped slaves as documented by the abolitionist William Still. Behzad Ranjbaran's new work, celebrating peace and social justice through settings of poems in Farsi, Spanish, Hebrew, Arabic, and English, completes the double bill. *May 7 at 8. (212-247-7800.)*

New York Choral Society
Bach's towering Mass in B Minor, a peak of the composer's creative output, is a mainstay of the choral repertoire, perhaps because it is as satisfying to sing as it is to hear. David Hayes conducts the Society and its in-house orchestra at Carnegie Hall. *May 8 at 8. (212-247-7800.)*

RECITALS

Leif Ove Andsnes
The Norwegian pianist completes his season-long residency with the New York Philharmonic with a solo recital. The wide-ranging program includes seldom showcased Nordic pieces by Nielsen and Sibelius, canonical fare by Beethoven and Schubert, and "Idyll and Abyss," a Schubert-inspired contemporary work by the German composer Jörg Widmann. *May 2 at 7:30. (David Geffen Hall. 212-875-5656.)*

Gerald Finley
Even in the opera house, the Canadian bass-baritone performs with the focus and sensitivity of a lied singer. In this recital, he partners with Julius Drake, the nonpareil collaborative pianist, for a program of songs by some of the giants of the genre: Schubert, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Rachmaninoff. *May 2 at 7:30. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-721-6500.)*

Daniil Trifonov
The final concert in the supernaturally gifted young Russian piano virtuoso's "Perspectives" series at Carnegie Hall finds him moving from the Romantic period, where he has made his name, into our own time. He has chosen ten works, one from each decade of the twentieth century. One can guess what he will sound like playing Bartók, Prokofiev, and Ligeti. How he will handle Copland's "Piano Variations," Stockhausen's "Klavierstück IX," and John Adams's "China Gates" is harder to predict, but revelations may be in store. *May 4 at 7:30. (212-247-7800.)*

92nd Street Y
Shai Wosner gives the second in a series of concerts devoted to Schubert's final six piano sonatas. This time, he performs the pensive Sonata in A Major, D. 959, and the more muscular Sonata in D Major, D. 850, named "Gasteiner" after the Alpine town of its composition. *May 4 at 9. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-315-5500.)*

Max Richter: "Sleep"
Richter, a German-born British composer and pianist, fashioned this eight-hour compendium of sweetly lulling, minimalist pieces for piano, vocals, strings, and electronics in collaboration with David Eagleman, an American neuroscientist. Here, Richter and the American Contemporary Music Ensemble present the U.S. première of the complete work in what could be its ideal setting: a studio filled with mattresses, to be used as intended. (Afterward, the bedding will be donated to charitable causes.) *May 4-5 at 10:30. (Spring Studios, 50 Varick St. maxrichtermusic.com.)*

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center
In a program titled "Tempest in C Minor," that stormy key unites three otherwise disparate works: a trio by Beethoven and quartets by Brahms and Fauré. They are navigated by the scintillating violinist Augustin Hadelich, alongside the pianist Inon Barnatan, the Calidore String Quartet, and other Society players. *May 6 at 5 and May 8 at 7:30. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5788.)*

JACK Quartet
Appearing as part of the Music Mondays series, this adventurous foursome engages with the stylistic wanderlust of Derek Bermel, an eclectic composer and a brilliant clarinettist. The program (which also features the soprano Mikaela Bennett and the pianist Aaron Wunsch) includes Bermel's clarinet quintet "A Short History of the Universe," and excerpts from his new opera, "The House on Mango Street." Admission is free; reservations are advised. *May 7 at 7:30. (Advent Lutheran Church, 2504 Broadway. musicmondays.org.)*

THE THEATRE



"Light Shining in Buckinghamshire," opening May 7, revisits the politics of the English Civil War.

Resistance Theatre

Rachel Chavkin finds America's present in England's revolutionary past.

Shortly after the 2016 Presidential election, the director Rachel Chavkin was brainstorming projects with James C. Nicola, the head of New York Theatre Workshop. Nicola suggested "Rhinoceros," Eugène Ionesco's absurdist drama from 1959, about the peril of mass movements. "I was, like, 'It's too late,'" Chavkin said recently. " 'The rhinoceros is in the White House.'" She opted instead for "Light Shining in Buckinghamshire," Caryl Churchill's trenchant retelling of the English Civil War. Written in 1976, the drama centers on three radical sects during the tumultuous period in the seventeenth century between the toppling of the monarchy and the Restoration. Chavkin sees it as a play for the resistance. "In its most succinct form, it's about a failed revolution," she said. "But I think it's still hopeful."

At thirty-seven, Chavkin has become a theatrical leading light, thanks to her inventive use of space. Her production of "Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812" moved from a pop-up supper club in the meatpacking district to Broadway's Imperial Theatre, where she immersed the audience in a Russian bacchanal, complete with rave music and pierogi. For "Hadestown," the folk musician Anaïs Mitchell's version of the Eurydice myth (slated for Broadway next year), she transformed New York Theatre Workshop into a web of walkways. But "Light Shining in Buckinghamshire," which opens on May 7, keeps things spartan and straight on, with just a few interactive moments. "I try not to get into 'bad touch' in terms of audience contact," Chavkin promised. "This is a play ultimately about economic justice, and so it felt really important that the production not feel extravagant in any way, because we're talking about the poor of a country rising up and saying, 'We have rights, too.'"

Chavkin inherited her politics from her parents, whom she describes as "die-hard warriors for social justice." (They met working for the National Health Law Program.) "I believe 'oxymoron' was taught to me as 'good insurance company,'" she recalled. "I was definitely raised with very anti-capitalist views." In Washington, D.C., where she grew up, her father took her to see plays at the Kennedy Center. But it wasn't until she got to New York University that she was "swept up with experimental theatre," taking in work by the Wooster Group and the choreographer William Forsythe. In "Buckinghamshire," she weds her political passions and her theatrical gifts, in language that can be startlingly contemporary. "One of the characters says, 'We can't breathe.' And there is that feeling that people are drowning in this world and this is a fight for their lives."

—*Michael Schulman*

OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

The Beast in the Jungle
John Kander and David Thompson wrote this dance-theatre piece, directed and choreographed by Susan Stroman and inspired by Henry James's 1903 novella, about a man convinced he has a terrible destiny. *(Vineyard, 108 E. 15th St. 212-353-0303. Previews begin May 4.)*

The Birds
The Greek director Nikos Karathanos stages an adaptation of the Aristophanes comedy, in which men and birds unite to build a utopia in the clouds. In Greek, with English supertitles. *(St. Ann's Warehouse, 45 Water St., Brooklyn. 718-254-8779. In previews. Opens May 6.)*

The Boys in the Band
Joe Mantello directs a fiftieth-anniversary revival of the seminal gay drama by Mart Crowley, starring Jim Parsons, Zachary Quinto, Matt Bomer, and Andrew Rannells. *(Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. In previews.)*

A Brief History of Women
As part of "Brits Off Broadway," the playwright Alan Ayckbourn directs his comedy about a man's encounters with remarkable women over six decades. *(59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200. Opens May 2.)*

Dance Nation
Clare Barron's new play, directed by Lee Sunday Evans, follows a team of preteen dancers competing in the Boogie Down Grand Prix in Tampa Bay. *(Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. In previews. Opens May 8.)*

The Gentleman Caller
Philip Dawkins's play, directed by Tony Speciale for the Abingdon Theatre Company, imagines a meeting between Tennessee Williams and William Inge in 1944, when Inge was working for a newspaper. *(Cherry Lane, 38 Commerce St. 866-811-4111. Previews begin May 5.)*

Long Day's Journey Into Night
Sir Richard Eyre directs the Bristol Old Vic production of the Eugene O'Neill drama, featuring Jeremy Irons and Lesley Manville ("Phantom Thread"). *(BAM Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Previews begin May 8.)*

Our Lady of 121st Street
In Stephen Adly Guirgis's 2002 play, a group of former classmates reunite at a funeral home to honor their late teacher, only to find that her body has been stolen. Phylicia Rashad directs. *(Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529. In previews.)*

Paradise Blue
Ruben Santiago-Hudson directs Dominique Morisseau's play, about a jazz trumpeter in Detroit's gentrifying Black Bottom neighborhood in 1949. *(Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529. In previews.)*

Peace for Mary Frances
The New Group presents Lily Thorne's play, directed by Lila Neugebauer and featuring Lois Smith as a nonagenarian born to Armenian refugees who is ready to die at home. *(Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. Previews begin May 8.)*

ILLUSTRATION BY RUNE FISKER

Summer and Smoke
Transport Group's Jack Cummings III directs the Tennessee Williams drama, in which a Southern minister's daughter falls in love with the neighborhood doctor. *(Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. 866-811-4111. In previews. Opens May 3.)*

NOW PLAYING

Carousel
The 1945 musical by Rodgers and Hammerstein (in a new revival, directed by Jack O'Brien) is a kind of intimate extravaganza, packed with so many ideas about the body, gender roles, premarital coupling, and fear of closeness that at times its force and clumsiness weigh on you like another body. The two-act spectacle is about the fantasy of love, and how it gets even hotter when it's interrupted or shattered by lawlessness or by death. In a small town in New England, Julie Jordan (Jessie Mueller) finds herself attracted to Billy Bigelow (Joshua Henry), a quintessential "bad boy," who works as a carrousel barker at the town fair. O'Brien's direction of Henry, who is black, and Mueller, who is white, is strong, especially when it comes to the way the couple communicate their desire: as if it were no big deal, even as you wait for it to be a very big deal. (Reviewed in our issue of 4/23/18.) *(Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)*

Harry Potter and the Cursed Child, Parts One and Two
Nineteen years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Harry Potter (Jamie Parker)—the Dad Who Lived—is a desk jockey at the Ministry of Magic and a bedevilled father of three. Most troublesome is his middle son, Albus (Sam Clemmett), made angry by the burden of his famous father and by his own lack of obvious talents. He connects with another scion and outcast, Scorpius Malfoy (Anthony Boyle), and misguided plans are soon hatched. The play, from a story by J. K. Rowling, John Tiffany (who directs), and Jack Thorne (who wrote the script), is a two-part, five-hour affair. For fans, it will pass in an anxious instant. What if the events in the Harry Potter books had turned out differently? That's the inspired device that sends the plot whirling. There are plenty of in-jokes, poignant cameos, and sentimental speeches about the gulf between parents and children, plus one awesome jump scare. But what will linger in the mind are the ingenious physical realizations of magic and the feeling of being cocooned in the all-encompassing goodness of Rowling's world. *(Lyric, 214 W. 43rd St. 877-250-2929.)*

The Metromaniacs
There is rhyme but little reason in David Ives's latest "translaptation" of an archaic French comedy, in this case a 1738 soufflé of a play by Alexis Piron. The story involves a whole bunch of people lying about their identity in order to . . . actually, there is no plot to speak of, besides assorted masters and servants, lovers and rivals pointlessly pretending to be someone else. The title refers to the poetry-mad Parisians, who all suffer from "an inflammation of the mental bursa / Where verse becomes your vice—and vice-a-versa." While Ives's rhyming is as virtuosic as usual, he is spinning his wheels. Michael Kahn's production for the Red Bull company is handsome enough, and the actors do their best, some with more zest than others. But even the airiest of concoctions can be deflated by a nagging sense of futility. *(The Duke on 42nd Street, 229 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010.)*

Mlima's Tale
In her follow-up to "Sweat," Lynn Nottage makes a drastic turn in locale and genre, going from Rust Belt realism to a globe-trotting, stylized look at the ivory trade. In the opening scene, Somali poachers fell the "great tusker" Mlima (a powerful, haunting Sahr Ngaujah, of "Fela!") with a poisoned arrow. The heartbreaking story then tracks the distinctively grand tusks from a corrupt Kenyan police chief all the way to their end, as a carved "statement piece" in the Beijing condo of a Chinese nouveau-riche couple. Despite its scope, the show, which relies mostly on one-on-one encounters (an ensemble of three play all the other roles), unfurls on a deeply moving human scale, and Jo Bonney's production has a stark elegance, with crucial support from Lap Chi Chu's lighting and Justin Hicks's live score. Never do we forget the barbaric cost of some people's décor. *(Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)*

My Fair Lady
Lerner and Loewe's hit 1956 musical (in a Lincoln Center Theatre revival, directed by Bartlett Sher) examines the reality of one man's fantasy of remaking a woman in his own image. Part of the pleasure of watching this staging is observing not how Eliza Doolittle (Lauren Ambrose, who has a beautiful, if limited, soprano) becomes more herself as the show goes on but how she learns to express that self—strong, indomitable, softened by dreams and wishes—in the language of the class that helps her cross over. It can seem as though Harry Hadden-Paton is overplaying Henry Higgins's snottiness, until you remember meeting any number of people like him, who frighten you with their chill while they try to draw you in with their smarts. Ambrose's Eliza, on the other hand, hurts us in the best possible way, when we realize too late, just as she does, that her love for Higgins amounts to a confusion between the construction of speech and the true language of feeling. (4/30/18) *(Vivian Beaumont, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200.)*

Saint Joan
A beatific smile on her lips, Condola Rashad plays the woman who helped liberate fifteenth-century France, and the title character of George Bernard Shaw's 1923 chestnut, as a holy fool. It is not a bad idea for a character who thought she had a direct line to God (the gap between visionary and religious nut is thin), but it's also not enough. Even in chain mail, Rashad's Joan looks as if she's on her way to a jamboree. This Manhattan Theatre Club revival surrounds her with wily performers, such as Patrick Page, who shines as both Baudricourt and the Inquisitor, but the director, Daniel Sullivan, doesn't bring any particular insights, so the actors who fare best are the experienced ones. The most memorable aspect of this stuffy show, and not in a good way, is Scott Pask's set, which appears to be made of giant golden chimes. *(Samuel J. Friedman, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)*

Summer
If Donna Summer was the Queen of Disco, the director Des McAnuff is the King of Slick. In this bio-musical featuring Summer's greatest hits, McAnuff uses the same tricks that made his staging of "Jersey Boys" so effective: familiar melodies building with anticipatory excitement, glittering scenery that never stops moving, and multiple narrators whisking the action along. Since there were four Jersey Boys but only one Summer, McAnuff splits her into three, played at different ages by LaChanze, Ariana DeBose, and Storm Lever—each of them dynamite. There's almost enough stagecraft to make you overlook the fact that the show never finds a coherent story to tell. Incidents from Summer's life fly by, from her childhood cameo in a murder case to her post-fame Christian reawakening, strung together with truisms like "Once you're on a roller coaster, it's real hard to get off." McAnuff is counting on it. *(Lunt-Fontanne, 205 W. 46th St. 877-250-2929.)*

Transfers
Two young men from the South Bronx (Ato Blankson-Wood and Juan Castano) arrive in western Massachusetts to interview for a full-ride scholarship at an élite university. An N.G.O. worker (Glenn Davis) is on hand to coach them on how to present their "stories" to the selection committee, proffering advice that is as abrasive as it is well intended: "Throw in a little more about why your grandmother was the one raising you." Lucy Thurber's script is based on her own experiences as a self-described "scholarship kid," and on those of some of her students at the MCC Theatre Youth Company. It's a work of big themes (luck, inequality) and powerful sentiments (hope, resentment), which in less competent hands might have come across as contrived. Under Jackson Gay's thoughtful direction, complexity and authenticity are preserved through and through. *(Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 866-811-4111.)*

Travesties
A work of nonsense and sensibility, Tom Stoppard's postmodern 1974 comedy whizzes back to Broadway. A historical footnote writ large and long, the play orbits around Henry Carr (Tom Hollander), a minor consular official stationed in Zurich in 1917, who more or less crossed paths with Vladimir Lenin, Tristan Tzara, and a mid-"Ulysses" James Joyce. The play is as aggressively intertextual as a typhoon in a library; since Carr and Joyce met while rehearsing "The Importance of Being Earnest" and sparred over the cost of a costume, Stoppard appropriates Wildean farce as a template. Under Patrick Marber's direction for the Roundabout, the wordplay is incorrigible, the showing off indictable. The whole audience sighs in agreement when Carr says, "I'm finding this conversation extremely hard to follow." Still, Stoppard brandishes each argument and gag with such joy that the play is as winning as it is indecipherable. *(American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300.)*

ALSO NOTABLE

Admissions Mitzi E. Newhouse. *Through May 6*. • **Angels in America** Neil Simon. • **Bobbie Clearly** Black Box, Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre. *Through May 6*. • **Children of a Lesser God** Studio 54. • **Escape to Margaritaville** Marquis. • **Frozen** St. James. • **Harry Clarke** Minetta Lane Theatre. • **The Iceman Cometh** Jacobs. (Reviewed in this issue.) • **Lobby Hero** Helen Hayes. • **Mean Girls** August Wilson. • **Miss You Like Hell** Public. • **The Seafarer** Irish Repertory. • **Three Tall Women** Golden. • **Zürich** Fourth Street Theatre. *Through May 5*.

ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

MOMA PS1
"Julia Phillips: Failure Detection"
This young German artist combines glazed ceramic elements with hardware to haunting effect. Sculptural vignettes allude to anatomy with handprints, masklike casts, and mysterious implements whose uses might be surgical, hygienic, or sexual. In "Extruder (#1)," a fragmentary figure, suspended from an armature of metal pipes, is reduced to its orifices and seems to have become one with the plumbing. Beside it, on a platform of concrete tiles, lies a very large, very dangerous-looking metal helix. Phillips's sculptures are singular, but they do have affinities with pioneering works that preceded them. The surreal air and corporeal references of her tableaux recall the oneiric installations of Louise Bourgeois; a quartet of monoprints, made using the crotches of panty hose to create webbed and ragged forms, nod to Senga Nengudi's innovative use of nylons to conjure the predicaments and potentials of the human body. *Through Sept. 3.*

Whitney Museum
"Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables"
This retrospective of the Iowan painter fascinates as a plunge into certain deliriums of the United States in the nineteen-thirties, notably a culture war between cosmopolitan and nativist sensibilities. But any notion that Wood—who died in 1942, of pancreatic cancer, on the day before his fifty-first birthday—is an underrated artist fizzles. "American Gothic" is, by a very wide margin, his most effective picture (although "Dinner for Threshers," from 1934, a long, low, cutaway view of a farmhouse at harvesttime, might be his best). Wood was a strange man who made occasionally impressive, predominantly weird, sometimes god-awful art in thrall to a programmatic sense of mission: to exalt rural America in a manner adapted from Flemish Old Masters. "American Gothic"—starchy couple, triune pitchfork, churchy house, bubbly trees—succeeded, deserving the inevitable term "iconic" for its punch and tickling ambiguity. The work made Wood, at the onset of his maturity as an artist, a national celebrity, and the attendant pressures pretty well wrecked him. Why Wood now? A political factor might seem to be in play. Although the show was planned before the election of Donald Trump, it feels right on time, given the worries of urban liberals about the insurgent conservative truculence in what is often dismissed—with a disdain duly noted by citizens of the respective states—as flyover country. *Through June 10.*

Museum of Arts and Design
"Surface/Depth: The Decorative After Miriam Schapiro"
Schapiro, who died in 2015, at the age of ninety-one, was a second-generation Abstract Expressionist turned first-generation feminist artist. She also became a leading figure in the Pattern and Decoration movement—a more-is-more retort to Minimalism, in the nineteen-seventies—and coined the portmanteau "femmage" to describe her ebullient, intricate, textile-and-paint compositions. By maintaining that domestic craft techniques and materials could also be used in fine art, Schapiro lit the path for countless artists who followed; this exhibition pairs examples from her œuvre with an inspired selection of paintings, assemblages, and sculptures by others, which echo not only Schapiro's formal strategies but also her politics, with tongue-in-cheek deployments of decorative elements. Ruth Root's colorful homage to her feminist-art forebears, made specifically for this occasion, is a shaped canvas with a scalloped edge, very much in the spirit of Schapiro's own fan- and heart-shaped femmages. Sanford Biggers repurposes antique quilts, embellishing their found geometry with sequins and paint to reflect on African-American traditions of abstraction. Sara Rahbar mines her Iranian-American heritage in customized Union Jacks, in which the white-on-blue stars are attended by densely sewn stripes made of decorative trim found in Kurdistan, camouflage-print military waist packs, name patches, and ammo. *Through Sept. 9.*

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

Annette Kelm
The German photographer's cryptic pictures—mostly still-lifes of such subjects as flowers, fabrics, dollar bills, and a miniature easel—feel at once spontaneous and carefully staged, reminiscent of the groundbreaking commercial work of the mid-twentieth-century pioneer of color printing Paul Outerbridge. "Still Life with Spring" is a pun on its title: a multicolored ceramic vase holds a vernal bouquet of peonies accompanied by a coiled metal spring. In the painterly "Holiday Season," rumpled daisy-print fabric provides the backdrop for a purse made from an old pair of bluejeans and leather. Cigarettes peek out of the denim pockets, alongside a spray of dried thistle. In this nonchalant collision of the mass-produced and the handcrafted, Kelm puts a sly twist on the tradition of vanitas. *Through May 12. (Kreps, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-741-8849.)*

Erin Shirreff
Negative space—and outer space, too—is as assertive as physical form in the work of this New York-based artist, which toggles between photographic and sculptural, flat and deep, moving and static. The centerpiece is a wall-filling video, entitled "Son," in which colors shift slowly around a central black circle; it was inspired by the recent solar eclipse, a moment when the sun resembled a void. On other walls, large crescents and slivers of printed aluminum are arranged in deep frames; while adamantly abstract, they could pass for dioramas of phases of the moon. With speckled cyanotypes printed on pictures of sculptures torn out of books, Shirreff seems to suggest that her own spatial investigations are simply part of a continuum—a reminder that even the stillest object is also on the move, thanks to the passage of time. *Through May 15. (Sikkema Jenkins, 530 W. 22nd St. 212-929-2262.)*

Gedi Sibony
This native New Yorker first made his name as a cerebral scavenger-minimalist, rescuing everyday cast-offs—broken venetian blinds, remnants of carpet—and reincarnating them into sculptures. If that poetic work was formalist haiku, his new room-filling rescue, "The King and the Corpse," is an epic: Sibony has transplanted a former White Castle, now scrubbed of all corporate identity, from Brooklyn to Chelsea. The ramshackle white porcelain-enamelled steel shell, with its battlement roof, is held together by screws, bolts, and ad-hoc materials (duct tape, scraps of wood, C-clamps). It's been modified somewhat to fit inside the space, where it just grazes the ceiling and leaves a dry moat of floor around its exterior. The structure's modularity may invite thoughts of Donald Judd's stacks; its reconceptualization of architecture recalls Michael Asher and what jargoneers call "institutional critique." But the institution in Sibony's crosshairs isn't the art-industrial complex for which the term was coined—it's that derelict white fortress, America itself. *Through May 5. (Greene Naftali, 508 W. 26th St. 212-463-7770.)*

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

Miyoko Ito
This transporting exhibition will likely be your introduction to Ito's cerebral and beautiful paintings: until her death, in 1983, the Berkeley-born artist remained little known outside her adopted home town of Chicago, where she was both celebrated and an outlier. Her idiosyncratic style is deftly described in an accompanying essay by Jordan Stein as "at once first-person and topographic." Ito's canvases verge on representation—of landscapes, interiors, and machines—while also appearing to be in a state of subtle flux. In the dusky "Gorodiva," from 1968, a winsome hybrid form (perhaps a protozoan absorbing a valise) seems to undulate, an effect achieved with the meticulous application of thinly painted ombré layers. Similarly, the green-gold stack of tubes in an untitled piece from 1971-72, which has some kinship with the work of Ito's fellow-Chicagoan Ray Yoshida, seems to sway as shifting light drapes it in partial shadow. *Through May 6. (Artists Space, 55 Walker St. 212-226-3970.)*

GALLERIES—BROOKLYN

Jan Groover
The photographer, who died in 2012, dedicated her career to the still-life. So the heart of this selection of her early works is surprising: a cache of eight-by-ten pictures of buildings, taken in 1971-72, in Hartford, Connecticut, where she was then teaching painting. Almost defiantly banal, in the vein of Bernd and Hilla Becher, they transform architecture into object. There are other treasures here, too, including a lush platinum-palladium print of bottles and watering cans set against dark velvet. To make one small triptych, in 1974, Groover waited by the side of a highway until she caught a sequence of cars in primary colors. That the shots are all blurry helps the speeding vehicles land a punch line about painting: Barnett Newman famously titled one series of canvases "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue." *Through May 15. (Borden, 91 Water St. 212-431-0166.)*

NIGHT LIFE



A father-and-daughter d.j. team stirs gospel into the house-music mix at Schimanski.

ILLUSTRATION BY LORENZO GRITTI

Dance Party Divine

Robert Hood, the d.j. known as Floorplan, brings his spiritual mission to clubs.

The d.j. set that Robert Hood performed as Floorplan in June, 2015, at the Weather Festival, a three-day event in Paris, seemed to sum up his trajectory from angry young techno renegade to gospel-powered global club-land paterfamilias. A Detroit native living in Alabama and an ordained minister since 2009, Hood opened with the stately piano-and-vocal introduction to a remix of the R. & B.-gospel choir Sounds of Blackness's "The Pressure, Pt. 1," but his selections soon plunged into a series of dark, heavy techno grooves—many of them his own recordings—with unabashed praise to the Lord surfacing in sampled vocals with increasing regularity; some of those transitions hit like a tidal wave. The set has received more than three hundred and seventy-five thousand views on YouTube. In a witty bit of counterprogramming, when Hood returned to the Weather Festival the following year, he abjured techno and disco entirely to play two hours of hip-hop.

There's actually little hip-hop in most of Hood's current music, though he started out as a rapper, under the moniker Rob Noise. Hood's production career had an auspicious beginning. In 1991, he became the third member of the techno group Underground Resistance, whose militant mien—"a jump-off from Public Enemy and a terrorist movement," Hood told me—fuelled a slew of tracks that upped the ante on techno's sound design and sense of menace alike, their titles doubling as manifestos: "Riot," "Punisher," "Sonic Destroyer." "I was enamored with sounds and noise, as opposed to melody," he explained. After leaving Underground Resistance, in 1993, Hood issued two stripped-back, highly controlled albums in 1994 that further altered dance music's course: "Minimal Nation," for which an entire subgenre, minimal techno, is named, and the tightly coiled, vigorously playful "Internal Empire," whose tracks were like sonic Magic Eye images, changing aural shape, first subtly and then at increasing speed.

As both a producer and a d.j., Hood stayed with that hard, pared-down sound for the next decade and a half. Then, in 2010, after his ordainment, he resurrected the alias Floorplan, under which he had released an occasional series of more relaxed house records, some based on disco loops, during the nineties. "God literally told me, 'I want you to put a gospel message in the music,'" Hood told *Rolling Stone*. Floorplan's breezier musical tone seemed to open Hood up spiritually as well. "God has given me a ministry," he told the British music Web site the Quietus. "It's about reaching as many souls as I can through techno, speaking God's truth and his gospel to as many ears as I can, taking the message to the street." On Floorplan's 2016 album, "Victorious," the act became a duo, with the addition of Hood's twenty-two-year-old daughter, Lyric. Onstage, the two of them d.j. together, his once insurrectionary techno now a family heirloom. They spin at Schimanski on May 5.

—*Michaelangelo Matos*

ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

Brazilian Girls
Back when Nublu, the Avenue C hot spot, was a semi-secret space hidden behind a nondescript door under a tiny blue light bulb, word of the heat coming from Brazilian Girls, its Sunday-night party quartet, helped turn the club into a destination. New York was shaking off the gloom of 9/11, and the band's groove-oriented pleasure principles, expressed using a globalist array of rhythms and one or more of the often masked singer Sabina Sciubba's six languages, called out to revellers in a time of anxiety. The band's members live in different parts of the world these days, but their latest album, "Let's Make Love," is a cohesive statement of purpose, with punk-driven songs that might be read as an antidote to a new age of tension. *(Music Hall of Williamsburg, 66 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. 718-486-5400. May 5.)*

Imarhan
Loosely translated from Tamashek, the language of the Sahara's semi-nomadic Tuareg people, "imarhan" means either "the ones I care about" or "the posse." Desert blues posses tend to wash up on American shores attired in native garb, but the members of this guitar-charged five-piece band from Tamanrasset, Algeria, announce both their relative youth and their cosmopolitan ambitions by gearing up in street clothes that seem to be a match for their omnivorous musical imaginations. The songs on "Temet," Imarhan's new album, can be censorious about a region (as well as a people) that has seen its share of conflict, but there's a lilt to go with every plaint, be it funk, ragga, or another pulse cadged from the troupe's globe-trotting. *(Rough Trade NYC, 64 N. 9th St., Brooklyn. roughtradenyc.com. May 2. David Rubenstein Atrium at Lincoln Center, Broadway between 62nd and 63rd Sts. atrium.lincolncenter.org. May 3.)*

King Krule
There's a certain confidence in live performance that comes only on the last night of a tour. The twenty-three-year-old British croaker King Krule—née Archy Marshall—rolls into town this week at the tail end of a monthlong stint in the States, which has no doubt added looseness and a unique energy to his brooding, lo-fidelity solo project. His newest release, last year's "The OOZ," is his most refined to date, nineteen cuts of jazz-dyed post-punk slow burners capped with Marshall's yawning, gravelly baritone. His music is by turns gloomy, confessional, and erotic, with a maturity and spirit big enough to fill this cavernous venue. *(Hammerstein Ballroom Manhattan Center, 311 W. 34th St. 800-745-3000. May 4.)*

Princess Nokia
The Afro-Nuyorican m.c. Destiny Frasqueri, who performs under the musical moniker Princess Nokia, is known for calling out injustices onstage and off. (A video of her throwing hot soup at a man making racist comments on the subway went viral in 2017.) Frasqueri takes the disingenuous and the disbelievers to task in her verses, while also making plain her vulnerabilities and dark humor: "The world was born of innies, and I was born an outie," she shares on "Goth Kid." Her latest mixtape, "A Girl Cried Red," is an emo album at its core, replete with plucky guitars and vocals that feel distant from her previous work. Yet Frasqueri's talk of bleeding eyes and stories of heartbreak aren't so much a genre throwback as they are part of a new future that she is helping forge, one that moves far beyond what its forebears could have imagined. *(Elsewhere, 599 Johnson Ave., Brooklyn. elsewherebrooklyn.com. May 5-6.)*

Soccer Mommy
Sophie Allison, a young singer and guitarist from Nashville, leads this quirkily named bedroom-pop project, which sounds something like Taylor Swift might had she been raised on Julie Doiron instead of Shania Twain. This spring, when Allison released her début album on the Mississippi boutique label Fat Possum, listeners took notice. The music is as openhearted as teen-age love letters, with Allison's gentle guitar work buoying her tender, chamomile-warm vocals. Her writing is equally vulnerable, and brave enough to be refreshingly clumsy—clear-eyed paeans to youthful infatuation and self-doubt, deftly sketching emotions you probably wish you'd left in a locker back in high school. Her two-date stop in Brooklyn may be your last chance to see her in a venue half as intimate as her music. *(Elsewhere, 599 Johnson Ave., Brooklyn. elsewherebrooklyn.com. May 2. Rough Trade NYC, 64 N. 9th St., Brooklyn. roughtradenyc.com. May 4.)*

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

Michael Formanek
An apprenticeship in the eighties with such mainstream titans as Freddie Hubbard and Joe Henderson gave Formanek, a bassist, all the hard-won grounding he needed to evolve into one of the most respected instrumentalists, composers, and bandleaders of today's adventurous scene. This wide-ranging residency finds him in the company of several audacious compatriots, including the guitarist **Mary Halvorson,** the pianist **Kris Davis,** and the trumpeter **Taylor Ho Bynum.** *(The Stone at the New School, 55 W. 13th St. thestonenyc.com. May 1-5.)*

Vincent Herring vs. Eric Alexander
The connection between pugilism and jazz isn't commented on much these days, but the golden era of the music was filled with mano-a-mano battles that left egos and reputations blood-spattered. Harking back to those brutal and undeniably thrilling days, the alto saxophonist Vincent Herring and the tenor saxophonist Eric Alexander, two modern masters of hard bop, enter the ring for a night of competitive rigor. *(Smoke, 2751 Broadway, between 105th and 106th Sts. 212-864-6662. May 4-6.)*

Zakir Hussain and Dave Holland
There is a cadre of jazz artists who obsess over artistic growth, living for the challenge of the new. The extraordinary bassist Dave Holland ranks high among them; here, he encounters another legendary virtuoso and inveterate musical explorer, the Indian percussionist Zakir Hussain, in a cross-cultural conversation that also includes other Indian improvisers and the saxophonist **Chris Potter.** *(Rose Theatre, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500. May 4-5.)*

Denny Zeitlin
Zeitlin hardly disappeared after his initial flurry of critical attention in the mid-sixties, but the whip-smart West Coast pianist (and professor of psychiatry) has reëstablished his place in the pantheon over the past decade, with a series of recordings featuring the bassist **Buster Williams** and the drummer **Matt Wilson.** Both of them join him May 4-5, following two nights of solo performances by the visiting leader. *(Mezzrow, 163 W. 10th St. mezzrow.com. May 2-5.)*

DANCE

New York City Ballet
N.Y.C.B. celebrates the centenary of Jerome Robbins's birth with a festival of his works. Robbins, known equally for his ballet and Broadway careers, was second only to Balanchine in his influence over the company. That influence is clear in the work of the young choreographer Justin Peck, whose newest ballet for the company, "Easy," is one of two anchors of the spring gala, on May 3. The dance will be performed in sneakers—an idea introduced by Robbins—and is set to Leonard Bernstein's jazzy "Prelude, Fugue and Riffs." Also at the gala is a new compilation of Robbins's Broadway work called "Something to Dance About," arranged by the musical-theatre choreographer Warren Carlyle. • May 2 at 7:30: "Concerto Barocco," "Agon," and "The Four Temperaments." • May 3 at 7, May 5 at 8, and May 6 at 3: "The Four Seasons," "Circus Polka," "Easy," "A Suite of Dances," and "Something to Dance About." • May 4 at 8, May 5 at 2, and May 8 at 7:30: "Fancy Free," "Dybbuk," and "West Side Story Suite." *(David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-721-6500. Through June 3.)*

A.I.M
Formerly known as Abraham.In.Motion, this now acronym-only company is still a showcase for the sought-after, erratic choreography of its gifted founder, Kyle Abraham (whose upcoming commissions include his first work for New York City Ballet, this fall). Here, he débuts an ensemble piece called "Meditation," and "INDY," his first solo for himself in many busy years. But he also seems to be turning the troupe into a multi-choreographer outfit, offering a première by his contemporary Andrea Miller. On an alternate program, Abraham salutes his elders and influences, presenting Bebe Miller's tempestuous tug-of-war "Habit of Attraction" (1987) and Doug Varone's "Strict Love" (1994), which juxtaposes robotic impassivity with rousing rock and Motown tunes. *(Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. May 1-6.)*

"A Prelude to the Shed"
The Shed, a high-profile multi-arts center being built near the High Line on West Thirtieth Street, won't open until 2019, but it's advertising itself a year in advance with two weeks of free performances and events on an undeveloped lot. There's quite a bit of dance. In the afternoons, William Forsythe presents a male duet that riffs on the extremity of his influential 1987 work "In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated" (in alternation with "This Variation," by Tino Sehgal, who

often concocts events for museums and is sometimes considered a choreographer). In the early evenings, Reggie Gray and his D.R.E.A.M. ring, adepts in the innovative street style called flexn who are known for their shows at the Park Avenue Armory, engage in dance battles. *(W. 31st St. between Ninth and Tenth Aves. theshed.org/#prelude. May 1-6 and May 8. Through May 13.)*

"E-Moves"
The long-standing Harlem series turns its focus to African-born choreographers. The most familiar to New York audiences is Nora Chipaumire, from Zimbabwe, represented by her breakthrough 2005 solo, "Dark Swan." Lacina Coulibaly, from Burkina Faso, offers a duet about African heritage, while Ousmane Wiles, from Senegal, mixes West African traditions with house and vogue. *(Harlem Stage at the Gatehouse, 150 Convent Ave., at 135th St. 212-281-9240. May 2-5.)*

Sarah Michelson
In the early two-thousands, the old Performance Space 122 was the main launching pad for Michelson's ascent as a polarizing choreographer with a confrontational aesthetic and a taste for gruelling rigor and discipline. Now, for the first time in thirteen years, she returns to the venue, which recently reopened as Performance Space New York. Michelson never reveals much about her work in advance, but the title of the new piece, "May2018/\," may connect it with "September2017/\" and "October2017/\," the especially cryptic exercises she presented last year at Bard College and the Kitchen. Explicitly or implicitly, her history with the place will inevitably be invoked. *(150 First Ave., at 9th St. 212-352-3101. May 3-5.)*

"The Kitchen Follies"
In conjunction with the exhibition "the past is here, the futures are coming," the filmmaker Charles Atlas, whose work has always been closely connected with dance and performance art, stages a variety show. The lineup includes such old friends as Johanna Constantine and DANCENOISE, insuring some outré spirit from the avant-garde of the eighties and nineties. Live video mixing and video portraits by Atlas are also part of the program. *(The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793. May 3-5. Through May 12.)*

Meg Stuart / "Until Our Hearts Stop"
"The body is mysterious," one of Meg Stuart's company members says in a documentary about her newest work, which was created in Berlin and is now premièring in New York. The piece, for six, is an exploration of intimacy and touch, the result of a long process of improvisation and research into various disciplines, including hypnosis and bondage. It is part dance, part theatre—a collage of passages exploring sexuality, conflict, fantasy, and connection, set to jazz performed onstage by a trio of musicians. *(N.Y.U. Skirball, 566 LaGuardia Pl. 212-998-4941. May 4-5.)*

"Works & Process" / Ephrat Asherie
The performance series at the Guggenheim presents its first evening devoted to hip-hop dance. Ephrat Asherie is a B-girl with an interest in the history of the form and its roots in African-American vernacular dance. Her newest piece, "Odeon," is a collaboration with her brother, a jazz pianist. Ahead of the première at Jacob's Pillow this summer, Asherie and her dancers will perform excerpts and talk about the ideas behind the show. *(Fifth Ave. at 89th St. 212-423-3575. May 6.)*

MOVIES

NOW PLAYING

Autumn Leaves
Robert Aldrich's deliciously, deliriously overheated 1956 melodrama of family agony and reckless romance is set in a frustration-racked Los Angeles that's replete with floundering high-culture strivers and failures fleeing the East Coast. It's a story about mental illness, presented with a terrifying frankness as well as with a constructive view of psychotherapy at a time when it was often stigmatized. Joan Crawford, with her angular, operatic intensity, brings tragic grandeur to the middle-class troubles of a sophisticated and lonely manuscript typist. A sort of muse to local literary aspirants, she meets a brash, garrulous young man (Cliff Robertson) who quickly falls for her but then displays the scarred side of his character. Crawford burns through the screen with the dark heat of her furiously wide-eyed gaze, but Aldrich shares the spotlight from behind the scenes. Serving up one of the most disturbing acts of violence in classic Hollywood, he doesn't stint on the horrors of psychological traumas; his caustic and bilious compositions conjure the rage and pent-up desires of the city's isolated survivors.*—Richard Brody (Museum of the Moving Image, May 6.)*

Borg vs. McEnroe
The icy Swedish tennis champion Björn Borg (played convincingly by Sverrir Gudnason) is the focus of the Danish director Janus Metz's entertaining sports film, a sharply edited drama centered on Borg's historic 1980 Wimbledon match against the American bad boy John McEnroe (Shia LaBeouf). Working with a script by Ronnie Sandahl, Metz poses the argument that Borg's calm demeanor and McEnroe's volatility weren't all that dissimilar—Borg just learned to channel his ferocity and drive into a quiet stoicism. This is a thin psychological insight, but the film is stylishly shot, and it zips along through flashbacks of the two players' early years of training and their very different ways of preparing for the big match. LaBeouf delivers a sometimes seething, sometimes combustible performance, and the electrifying re-creation of the finals does justice to the sport of tennis, and to competitive fury itself.*—Bruce Diones (In limited release and on video on demand.)*

Duck Butter
The hope of building a strong and lasting relationship on the basis of a sex game is the core of this emotionally intense but psychologically facile drama. Naima (Alia Shawkat), an aspiring actress in Los Angeles, meets and makes out with a singer-songwriter named Sergio (Laia Costa) at a bar, but deflects her suggestion that they spend an entire day together and give each other an orgasm per hour. Then Naima is fired from a movie that could have been her big break; needing consolation, distraction, and oblivion, she knocks on Sergio's door and takes her up on the offer. Much of the movie is a chamber drama for the two women, split between Sergio's rumpled house and Naima's pin-neat one, and the action is divided between semi-explicit but merely illustrative sex scenes and long stretches of dialogue that extract huge emotional shifts from tossed-off phrases and gestures. The exaggerated, unambiguous expressivity and the connect-the-dots definitions of character (featuring pat confessions and reheated memories) reflect the closed-off academicism of acting workshops and screenplay pitches rather than the open-ended complexities of life. The director, Miguel Arteta (who co-wrote the script with Shawkat), finds no symbolic dimension or wider resonance in the schematic proceedings.*—R.B. (In limited release and streaming.)*

Godard Mon Amour
Even if this drama, directed by Michel Hazanavicius, weren't based on the true story of the relationship between the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard and the actress Anne Wiazemsky, in 1967 and 1968, but were merely the story of a pair of fictional artists in political and romantic conflict, it would sink under the weight of its witless vulgarity. Louis Garrel stars as Godard, who took an intense interest in left-wing ideologies and their cinematic implications and, at thirty-seven, was active in the Events of May, 1968, taking a leading role in shutting down the Cannes Film Festival. Stacy Martin plays the twenty-year-old Wiazemsky (on whose memoirs the movie is based) as she attempts to join Godard in his working life but finds herself shunted aside by his newfound political passions and wounded by his temperamental, egotistical outbursts. Hazanavicius skips over the detailed observations and nuanced insights of Wiazemsky's books in favor of parodies of Godard's earlier work, replacing its vast substance, fierce originality, and unsparing intimacy with empty stylistic winks. He also eliminates most of the fascinating, ambitious activities that nourished the couple's romance and their art (such as meetings with John Lennon and Paul McCartney), and reduces his world-historical protagonists to figments of his own thin imagination. In French.*—R.B. (In limited release.)*

I Feel Pretty
Amy Schumer works hard to infuse this comedy, built around dated self-help clichés, with a bit of vitality. She stars as Renee Bennett, a frustrated employee of a high-end New York cosmetics company who's relegated to its grim basement annex in Chinatown. She's unhappy with her face, her body, and her life; seeking change in a spin class, she falls off a bike, bumps her head, and awakens with boundless confidence in her beauty and her abilities. Suddenly frank and assertive, she chats up a shy young man (Rory Scovel), who becomes her boyfriend; talks herself into a job at the company's glamorous midtown headquarters; and is soon propelled into a prominent position representing the firm's new low-priced line. She also becomes an arrogant jerk who alienates her best friends (Aidy Bryant and Busy Philipps) and is tempted to sleep with one of the company's heirs (Tom Hopper). As written and directed by Abby Kohn and Marc Silverstein, Renee and her friends remain featureless ciphers, though Schumer delivers several moments of antic inspiration (including a wild dance that, unfortunately, is filmed clumsily).*—R.B. (In wide release.)*

The Moderns
Alan Rudolph's wry and stylized 1988 drama, set in Paris in 1926, is centered on Nick Hart (Keith Carradine), an American artist who's negotiating the city's aesthetic, financial, and romantic minefields. The story draws on the work and the life of Ernest Hemingway—played by Kevin J. O'Connor as both a fiercely devoted writer and a

dandified wit. The action, akin to that of "The Sun Also Rises," is about Nick's reacquaintance, in Paris, with his former lover, Rachel Stone (Linda Fiorentino), who's now married to a predatory businessman (John Lone). Nick has plenty of distractions, including an art dealer (Geneviève Bujold) and a socialite (Geraldine Chaplin) who try to recruit him as a forger, and a gossip columnist (Wallace Shawn) with whom he works. But the movie's disparate elements are unified less by the plot than by Rudolph's distinctive, rhapsodic style, with its sinuous long takes and archly elusive performances. With a few brilliant anachronisms (including music by the singer-songwriter Charlélie Couture), he distills the story's mix of sexual obsession, artistic passion, outsized celebrity, loose money, and drawing-room bravado into a vision of modern life—down to Hollywood's place as the unavoidable center of cultural attention.—*R.B. (Quad Cinema, May 3.)*

Mrs. Hyde

Serge Bozon's sharply political comedy—a giddily imaginative reworking of Robert Louis Stevenson's classic tale—stars Isabelle Huppert, who revels in its sly blend of dissonant humor, intellectual fervor, and macabre violence. She plays a double role, starting out as Marie Géquil (pronounced like "Jekyll"), a stiffly ineffective science teacher in a nondescript working-class high school filled with students of African and Middle Eastern descent. Then, zapped by one of her own experimental devices, Marie becomes Mrs. Hyde, a suddenly energetic and effective educator who awakens her students—especially one boy, the formerly disruptive Malik (Adda Senani)—to the beauties of science. Yet her newfound ardor for bold classroom initiatives is matched by literal fires that course through her body and eventually burst out, to catastrophic effect. Bozon, working with a script that he cowrote with Axelle Ropert, confronts and overturns stereotypes of France's white and nonwhite populations alike, and most fiercely mocks the bureaucratic bombast of by-the-book functionaries. As in Stevenson's story, the unleashing of Marie's latent furies inevitably veers toward horror, infusing Bozon's sociological satire with bitter ironies about the forces of order and the uses of disorder. In French.—*R.B. (In limited release.)*

A Quiet Place

Behind John Krasinski's film lies a pleasingly plain idea. The world has been ravaged by sightless monsters, whose enormous ears allow them to pick up the faintest noise—human speech, say—and attack its source. Thus it is that Lee Abbott (Krasinski), his wife, Evelyn (Emily Blunt), and their children, Regan (Millicent Simmonds) and Marcus (Noah Jupe), pursue their lives, as best they can, amid the sounds of silence. In an isolated farmhouse, they walk barefoot along soft paths and communicate in sign language. (Simmonds, a determined presence onscreen, is deaf; you can feel the other actors taking their cues from her.) Dialogue is sparse, although Lee and his son can talk if drowned out by a thundering waterfall. The movie is curt and crisp, easily skirting the gaps in its plot, and the set pieces are laid out at careful intervals; one sequence, packed with fear and resourcefulness, is set in a corn silo. Krasinski has not really made a horror film; rather, he has taken the warmest of American themes—the solace of family and home—and chilled it with suspense.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 4/16/18.) (In wide release.)*

Saboteur

For his first thriller set in America, from 1942, Alfred Hitchcock runs loopily through a gamut of genres, filming in a range of settings, from California to New York, to depict a country that lives in the image of its movies. His set pieces take on the blue-collar drama, the Western, the high-society mystery, the urban police story, and the circus melodrama, while capturing the paranoia of a country newly at war. The plot concerns a worker in a munitions plant (Robert Cummings) who is wrongly suspected of involvement in a deadly sabotage plot and must go on the lam to pursue the real perpetrator. In a classic twist of Hitchcockian moralism, his troubles are sparked by an ill-timed leer at a female colleague. Soldiers on patrol behind cafeteria workers, Fascist terrorists lurking in towns and cities, and the chilling crackle of hectic radio warnings set a tone of ambient menace. The final scene, atop the Statue of Liberty, involves nightmarish horror, which Hitchcock leavens with a comically surreal triviality: at a time of war, life hangs, more than ever, by a thread.—*R.B. (MOMA, May 3, and streaming.)*

Zama

The bureaucratic and intimate frustrations of a Spanish magistrate in a remote Argentinean outpost in the eighteenth century furnish the director Lucrecia Martel's new film with rarefied passions and inspire a highly original style to match. The middle-aged official, Diego de Zama (Daniel Giménez Cacho), is posted far from his wife and children, and his relentless requests for a transfer are mocked and ignored by local governors. One young subordinate openly defies him; another, a writer, troubles his conscience. He hears from Spanish settlers who've murdered the indigenous population and now lack slaves; an aristocratic woman seeks his help and toys with his affections. With a dreamlike obliviousness, Zama observes and colludes in the brutal injustices on which the colonial regime runs. Then, in despair, he volunteers for a dangerous mission in pursuit of bandits. Adapting a novel by Antonio Di Benedetto, Martel creates a cinema of dialectical tensions; the bustling activity of offices and drawing rooms veers outside the frame while voices of authority and complaint assail the hero with a bewildering tangle of conflicting demands and desires. The dramatic fusion of physical and administrative power captures nothing less than the bloody forging of modernity. In Spanish.—*R.B. (In limited release.)*

ABOVE & BEYOND



ILLUSTRATION BY PABLO AMARGO

"A Prelude to the Shed"

The city is a year away from the opening of the Shed, a multipurpose arts-and-entertainment space currently under construction where the High Line and Hudson Yards meet. As a preview of the wide-ranging types of programming being proposed for the new structure (the design is a collaboration between Diller Scofidio + Renfro and the Rockwell Group), a pop-up venue in the shadow of the rising building will host a twelve-day, free event that features panel discussions, music, and dance performances. On May 2, Laurie Anderson and fellow-panelists will explore the challenges of connecting older modes of cultural production to the tech sphere ("Beyond the Body/Mind Division: Neuroscience, Technology, Spirituality"). On May 8, the cultural critics Barbara Browning and Nelson George and others will contemplate how Margaret Mead's call for a more holistic approach to modern creative practices has manifested in rave and hip-hop culture ("Beyond the Division of the Senses: Ritual and Celebration"). *(W. 31st St. between Ninth and Tenth Aves. theshed.org/#prelude. May 1-6 and 8-13.)*

READINGS AND TALKS

Murmrr

A raconteur by temperament as well as by trade, the author Geoff Dyer invites readers to share his seemingly boundless curiosity. Fortunately, his fertile imagination is matched by prose that is exacting and illuminating. Dyer's most recent obsession is on display in his new book, "The Street Photography of Garry Winogrand," in which he muses on a hundred images by the famed photographer, who captured the immediacy of sidewalk scenes. Dyer talks with Michael Almereyda, a filmmaker and critic, known for his 2000 adaptation of "Hamlet" and documentaries about William Eggleston and Sam Shepard. *(17 Eastern Pkwy., Brooklyn. murmrr.com. May 2.)*

92nd Street Y

Revivals are a staple of contemporary Broadway, but works rarely speak across generations with the power of Tony Kushner's "Angels in America." For the second time since 1993, when it débuted at the Walter Kerr Theatre, the play, in an acclaimed new production, ranks among the most coveted tickets in town. Kushner discusses the making of his award-winning exegesis on America during the AIDS crisis of the eighties with the writers Isaac Butler and Dan Kois, who conducted hundreds of hours of interviews with the original production's principals and turned them into an exhaustive new oral history of the play, "The World Only Spins Forward: The Ascent of 'Angels in America.' " *(1395 Lexington Ave. 212-415-5500. May 4 at 7:30.)*

FOOD & DRINK



TABLES FOR TWO

Annicka

544 Manhattan Ave., Brooklyn (718-599-1556)

The other night at Annicka, a new restaurant across from McCarren Park, I couldn't help but think of Kermit the Frog. A woman sitting at the bar, under stained-glass panels in multiple shades of green, was wearing a jade-colored shirt and drinking water that had been poured from a green bottle. The ends of her dark-blond hair were dyed—what else?—green. Meanwhile, I was enjoying a bowl of "spring vegetable and hominy," an incredibly viridescent sort of salad-as-soup, featuring both snap and shelling peas, asparagus, beans, radishes, mint, parsley, cilantro, and melty bits of preserved lemon in a thick, pesto-like broth. At Annicka it was—forgive me—easy bein' green.

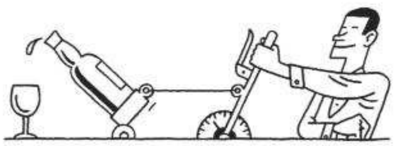
There are lots of other jokes you could make about this restaurant, with a nod to "Portlandia." It operates under Governor Cuomo's "farm brewery" license, which allows any New York State brewer—in this case, Greenpoint Beer & Ale Company—to sell alcoholic beverages by the glass so long as they're made mostly with locally grown ingredients. Almost everything else on the menu is local, too, sourced, when possible, from North Brooklyn Farms, a few blocks away. You could laugh at the fact that the bathroom door handles are made of farm tools; you could say, "2007 called and it wants its mismatched vintage tableware and ironic schoolhouse chairs back." You could roll your eyes at the cultured nut-milk butter or scoff at a cocktail made with absinthe and spirulina, which smells like raw yeast.

But if you got hung up on all that, you might miss the fact that the food is excellent, sometimes excitingly so. In the last gasps of winter, addictively sour, salty lemongrass chicken sausage, laced with Treviso and white kimchi, was fresh proof of the power of hearty lettuces and preserves. Wedding rice, a spin on the Persian dish *tachin*, a kind of crunchy-edged, savory cake, felt worthy of celebration: topped with cucumber raita, chopped almonds, and sliced chili, it hid sweet, juicy scallops and mussels within its densely packed grains. The nut-milk butter, served with flaky sea salt and sourdough, was a profoundly convincing substitute for the real thing, as was the macadamia ricotta.

There was plenty for hard-core carnivores, too: a whole ham steak with eggs at brunch; pork chops; lamb ragu. But as I finished my braised beef over grits, I thought only of the unusual garnish, a thick but tender leaf that tasted vaguely of licorice. A server, asked to identify it as she cleared the table, stuck her nose deep into the bowl. "Nasturtium," she declared. Naturally, it was green. *(Dishes $6-$30.)*

—Hannah Goldfield

BAR TAB



Marie's Crisis
59 Grove St.

The pamphleteer Thomas Paine, chief propagandist of both the American and the French revolutions, found himself maligned, in his later years, as an infidel. An unrepentant Deist, he spent his final days penniless, in a ramshackle house in Greenwich Village, shouting away the clergymen who stopped by to save his soul. The building was destroyed in 1839, and the new one that arose in its place now holds, in its basement, a divey piano bar, where N.Y.U. musical-theatre students, heavy-lidded office workers, and Jimmy Fallon go to warble out show tunes. Steps from the piano is a three-panelled mirror lined with dusty liquor bottles and etched with the words "Rights of Man," Paine's defense of popular revolt. In 1801, Paine opined that merchant ships crossing the embattled Atlantic should fly rainbow flags as a sign of peace. Felicitously, on a recent evening, a slight man with an Eddie Munster haircut, wearing a sweatshirt with rainbows in the hood and around the elbows, took his seat behind the piano. His fingers rolled across the keys as revellers encircling him crooned the polytheist paean "We Dance," from the Broadway show "Once on This Island," and empty bottles of Stella Artois accumulated under the stairs. Soon, a medley of songs from "The Little Mermaid" began, and as the tipsy choir reached the climax to "Part of Your World" they lifted their hands toward the Christmas lights hanging from the trembling rafters. "This is why I'm gay!" one man cried, caught up in ecstasy. It was the kind of personal revelation that might have made Paine raise a glass and sing.*—Neima Jahromi*

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID WILLIAMS FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
CRASH COURSE

We are fast approaching the tenth anniversary of the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. What passes for the official date is September 15th, the day that Lehman Brothers collapsed, but the crisis was under way months earlier, and the commemorative reëvaluations have already begun in the business press. The obvious question to ask is whether the financial markets, which have risen for most of the past decade but have been alarmingly shaky of late, could crash again. The answer largely depends on whether the Trump Administration undoes the best protection that we have against such an event: the Dodd-Frank law, which was passed in 2010, in response to the crash, after thirty years of financial deregulation.

In the early days of the New Deal, the federal government set up an elaborate array of controls over the financial system. For half a century before that, the system crashed regularly; for half a century afterward, it didn't crash at all. Effective precautions created the illusion that they were not necessary, and, little by little, the government drastically scaled back what Democrats as well as Republicans had come to view as an outmoded set of constraints on banks' size, scope, and assumption of risk. Conventional wisdom is a powerful force. Even on the verge of the 2008 crisis, almost no one believed that a collapse of the entire system was possible. Dodd-Frank, by placing unregulated new markets under government supervision and by requiring big banks to behave less riskily, reversed the swing of the pendulum.

By no means, though, has the potential for crisis passed. Moreover, if anything were to go wrong now, it would do so under an unstable and ill-informed head of state at a moment of political uncertainty, making the problem much more difficult to manage. The markets have calmed—except when Donald Trump unsettles them with a tweet—and the banks are healthy, but some negative trends that have been building for decades, and destabilizing politics, have worsened: income inequality, large regional variations in the distribution of economic well-being, and the political system's adoption of an excessive faith in markets. After the crash, banks received swift, substantial help from the government, while people who had lost their jobs and their houses were largely left to fend for themselves. The result was that some places—roughly speaking, the financial capitals—recovered much faster than others, helping to create a populist resentment that Trump exploited to win the Presidency. The same phenomenon drove the success of the Brexit referendum, in Britain, and Viktor Orbán's three electoral victories, in Hungary.



In the United States, the immediate political response to the crash was predictable. Liberals blamed deregulation and lax supervision of the big banks. Conservatives blamed the growth of subprime mortgages. It's a false apposition. Subprime mortgages, which were bundled and sold as glamorous new financial instruments, were poorly evaluated by private rating agencies, and fell outside the scope of the government's securities regulators; they were bought and sold with borrowed money by banks that had become wildly incautious about speculating with their funds. Today, because of a wave of post-crash mergers, the biggest banks are even bigger than they were, and financial power is more concentrated than it has been in at least a century. So everything depends on how well the government regulates the handful of "too big to fail" institutions that sit atop the system.

During the 2016 Presidential campaign, Trump was more showily anti-Wall Street than Hillary Clinton was, but he has consistently attacked Dodd-Frank. Anything involving banks brings to the fore the conflicts in his Administration between the Wall Streeters and the anti-globalists. It's hard to tell at any moment which camp is winning, because Trump is so blithely unconcerned with consistency. So far, his most

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

worrisome financial-policy move has been to appoint Mick Mulvaney, the former Republican congressman from South Carolina, who is the head of the Office of Management and Budget, to be the acting chair of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. The Obama Administration set up the bureau, which was authorized under Dodd-Frank, to guard against banks' offering too-good-to-be-true products to unsophisticated consumers. It was intended to be an independent agency, protected from direct political influence. The idea of someone who works directly for the Trump White House supervising the bureau traduces its entire purpose. Sure enough, Mulvaney, who opposed it from the start, has begun to weaken safeguards against predatory financial activity. He has proposed, among other things, rolling back restrictions on short-term, high-interest bank lending.

There are lots of places to chip away at Dodd-Frank, until the changes add up to systemic risk. The insurance giant A.I.G., which the government rescued a day after it let Lehman Brothers fail, is no longer deemed a "systemically important financial institution," subject to maximum government scrutiny. A bill now in Congress would lower the level of government supervision of two institutions, State Street and Bank of New York, that practice "custodial banking," and would exempt a larger category of big but not enormous banks from regular stress tests.

The most significant threat to the safeguards of Dodd-Frank would be to sharply lower the amount of capital that the biggest banks are required to hold in reserve. Doing so would make them—and the financial system as a whole—far more vulnerable in a moment of panic, when everybody wants to withdraw assets in a hurry. Such a move wouldn't require congressional approval, just the assent of several agencies. And it could happen soon, when Martin Gruenberg, the only remaining Democratic appointee to head a government financial agency—the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation—steps down. Trump's nominee to replace him, Jelena McWilliams, declined, in her confirmation hearings, to state a position on capital requirements.

Financial deregulation doesn't take place in secret, exactly. It unfolds step by technical step, across half a dozen federal agencies, with the prospective details revealed in long lists of dense rules. The banking industry has the means and the motivation to stay on top of it all. The public, except in a crisis, does not. But, if we don't want to be subject again to devastating events in the markets and their even more devastating political consequences, we will need to pay close attention.

—*Nicholas Lemann*

PARIS POSTCARD
FIRST BOOK



François Hollande climbed into a minivan, knocking newspapers and a box of tissues onto the floor. The van drove away from a tech incubator called Station F, where he had had a meeting. It was a sublime spring afternoon in Paris, even behind smoked glass. Hollande, the seventh President of the Fifth Republic, brought up Emmanuel Macron, his successor. He sort of had to. Macron had just landed in Washington, D.C., for a handsy, headline-dominating state visit. Hollande seemed less than impressed that Macron had given an interview to Fox News, in English, no less. "No chance," Macron had said, when Chris Wallace asked if he would back down in the standoff with groups including *les cheminots*, France's railway workers, thousands of whom have been striking since April.

"What are the *cheminots* going to think when they hear this?" Hollande said. "I think that there's a principle that when you're visiting a foreign country, or when you talk to the foreign media, you don't talk about what you're doing in France," he added later. "One doesn't do internal politics during a trip abroad—that's it."

Hollande just published "Les Leçons du Pouvoir," a four-hundred-and-seven-page account of his five years in office. It is the thirteenth-best-selling book in France, between a self-help guide and a thriller. Hollande wrote it in longhand, often on planes, using a Paper Mate felt-tipped pen. "I lose less time with this method than with the computer," he said. "But that supposes that there's someone who's going to come decipher my handwriting. That's what takes time!"

The van proceeded across town. Grand doors opened and it pulled into a paved courtyard off the Rue de Rivoli. Hollande jumped out and walked a few brisk steps toward an elevator. A guard with a machine gun was already in place. Soon, Hollande was in his offices, where Philae, his black Lab, bounded around and two receptionists sat at adjoining desks. Hollande introduced them as Samia and Amandine, the people who had translated his manuscripts into type.

"Here, look at his writing!" Samia said, holding aloft a piece of paper covered in upright, cramped printing.

Hollande wanted the book to be readable, and widely read. "I try to put a little humor in the words," he said. His recollection of two telephone calls with Donald Trump is certainly amusing. During the first, Hollande writes, "he talked about our gastronomy, our wines, our monuments, abstaining from any mention of our other virtues." During the second, Trump inquired, to Hollande's shock, whether he knew any advisers who might be interested in joining Trump's Presidential team. "How to respond?" Hollande writes. "Through laughter, discreetly muffled." Hollande ended up suggesting Henry Kissinger. "A long silence followed my suggestion. He understood that I had understood. We wouldn't go any further."

Hollande, the only incumbent in modern French history not to seek reëlection, left office with dismal approval ratings. At his office, he took a seat near a window that overlooked the Tuileries Garden. He admitted that he hadn't dared to read his Amazon reviews. They weren't bad, for a first-time author: three stars, with forty-one per cent of readers giving five stars and forty-eight per cent giving one.

"*Ah, oui*," Hollande said. "That's very interesting. That means that it corresponds well to the attitude in relation to me."

"Very polarized?" a visitor ventured.

"Exactly. There are people who love and people who detest. There's no middle." The visitor read a few of the comments aloud.

"Let's see, 'This book is terrific.'"

"That's the partisans," Hollande said.

"'More Flanby than ever.'" (The comment referred to a pejorative custard-related nickname.)

"*Voilà!*"

Hollande said that it had not been easy to write the book, because he knew that every sentence would be scrutinized. "It was necessary that what I put on paper not be approximate, or needlessly hurtful for anyone," he said. "I didn't want to write a pamphlet, a book to denounce. I wanted to write an authentic, sincere, and, above all, useful book. So that the French could penetrate the apparatus of power, and understand what had been my decisions and my emotions." (A person parsing words could have taken that as a dig at Macron, who has tried to cultivate an official mystique, in contrast with the willfully normal approach of his predecessor. "Those who say the people are looking for a king should never forget they're in a country where one had his head cut off!" Hollande writes in the book.)

Soon, Hollande was off to a signing at the Galignani bookstore, down the block. On the sidewalk, he began a sort of self-conscious processional, lingering for a handshake in a crosswalk. A crowd waited at the bookstore. Hollande sat down at a table—there was a vase of red roses, the Socialist Party emblem, recalling the ones he held onstage on his Election Night—to write his dedications. The first person in line was Hervé Chapron, a former director of France's state employment agency.

"To Hervé Chapron, a specialist in employment, who knows that the first lesson of power is to reconcile cultures," he wrote. "Cordially, François Hollande."

—*Lauren Collins*

STICKY FINGERS
FISHING



President Trump seems awfully worried about the financial state of the United States Postal Service. He thinks the culprit is Amazon. "This Post Office scam must stop," he tweeted. "I am right about Amazon costing the United States Post Office massive amounts of money for being their Delivery Boy!" Maybe no one has told Trump about what is arguably the Postal Service's most pressing crisis.

"It's called mailbox fishing," Phil Bartlett, the inspector in charge at the New York division of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, said recently at the agency's headquarters, on West Thirtieth Street. On a table in front of him was a small bottle of Tropicana cranberry juice. It was coated in a viscous white goo, and a black shoelace had been knotted around its neck. "This is actually a fishing device," he said, touching the bottle. "It's very sticky, as you can see. It's rat glue."

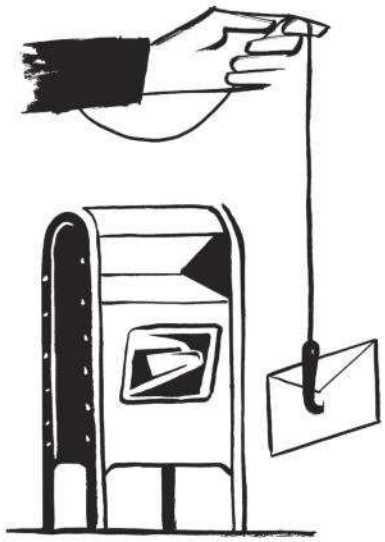
Mailbox fishing—as distinct from phishing—refers to a low-tech kind of mail theft that has spiked in recent years. In 2015, letter carriers began to notice that the standard blue sidewalk mailboxes in some Bronx and Manhattan neighborhoods had been smeared with gluey substances. An uptick in mail theft—stolen checks, cash, money orders, and gift cards—followed.

Bartlett, who wore a gray suit and a striped tie, and who speaks with a hint of a Boston accent, lifted the bottle by its shoelace lead. Crooks, he said, "lower it into the box, and they jig it around"—he flicked his wrist so that the bottle bobbed in the air—"and they get the mail to stick to it. Then, when they pull it out of the box, they have access to the mail."

Perpetrators use various methods to alter checks once they've fished them out. Bartlett said, "There's products out there, things like Ink Away, or sometimes nail-polish remover. Or they soak them in a solution containing brake fluid." Then they'll reissue the checks to somebody else. Alternatively, Bartlett went on, "they just take the bank routing number and the account number. You can buy software and make a counterfeit check."

In response, the Postal Service has been partnering with the police to stake out street mailboxes. "We catch the knuckleheads out there actually fishing and arrest them," Bartlett said.

The U.S.P.S. has also begun the painstaking process of replacing or retrofitting every blue mailbox in the city and some surrounding suburbs—roughly seven thousand boxes in all—with features designed to thwart fishing attempts. The new model looks identical to the old one, except that instead of a wide hinged opening there is a narrow slit, three-eighths of an inch high. Anyone mailing multiple letters will no longer hear the satisfying shuffle and thunk of envelopes hitting the pile inside. Letters have to be inserted into the "skinny slit," as Bartlett calls it, one or two at a time. The new boxes are also equipped with internal anti-fishing mechanisms, which, for security reasons, Bartlett declined to describe.



Downstairs, a shipment of several dozen new mailboxes had recently arrived. An unwrapped box, coated in graffiti-resistant paint in a shade called Postal Blue, glinted in the afternoon light.

"New York deserves a box like this," Bartlett said, patting its curved top. "This is the Cadillac of boxes."

A few weeks later, a small flatbed truck pulled up beside a rusty old mailbox in the Fordham Manor neighborhood of the Bronx. Two Postal Service workers got out. One, Joffre Taylor, crouched beside the old box. "1988," he said, reading numbers off the side. He wore a purple hooded sweatshirt, a down vest emblazoned with the letters "USPS," and protective gloves. A master key hung from a gold chain at his waist. Using a power drill, he began to remove the bolts securing each of the box's legs to the concrete, sending up clouds of dust.

Meanwhile, his partner, Hakim McPhee, who had on layered hooded sweatshirts, removed a new mailbox from

the truck and shimmied it to the curb. The two men used special bolts, which can't be removed with regular tools, to anchor it to the pavement. McPhee said that, to pry a box loose from the sidewalk, "some people back their cars into it."

It was the fourth box they'd replaced that morning. An earlier job, at 75 Strong Street, had involved a box whose feet were sunk in cement. Taylor had to cut its legs loose with a buzz saw.

By the afternoon, a new box outside a Fordham Manor post office had caught the attention of José Marrero, a driver for R.B.S. Furniture Warehouse, next door, who had been assembling a lilac love seat on the sidewalk.

"I think it's good," he said, peering through the slit. Six months ago, Marrero mailed a fifty-dollar money order from an old-style mailbox in the Bronx. "It never got there," he said.

Other passersby were confounded by the new box. A few poked at the skinny slit with their fingers. One woman, after a failed attempt to deposit an envelope, stood in front of the mailbox, squinting. She walked around it slowly. Seeing no obvious way in, she gave up. "That's crazy," she muttered as she went into the post office.

—*Lindsay Gellman*

SECOND ACT DEPT.
MEDICINAL



Ricky Williams, the Miami Dolphins running back, retired from the N.F.L. in 2012. "I wanted to go on a spiritual quest," he said the other day, "to find out who I was and what I'm really here to do." So far, he has become a certified yogi, learned how to perform craniosacral therapy, and studied evolutionary astrology. For three hundred dollars he will interpret the orientation of the stars at your birth. Last month, he launched Real Wellness by Ricky Williams, a cannabis-based line of tonics, salves, and vape cartridges—an offshoot of his long and sometimes complicated relationship with herbs. (Repeated violations of the N.F.L.'s drug policy had something to do with Williams's early retirement, although he was also bored and battered by football.)

A toothache recently led Williams to pop a few Advil, but he generally tries to avoid Western medicine. He keeps a closet full of healing herbs at his house, in Venice, California, and he is in the first year of a doctoral program at Emperor's College of Traditional Oriental Medicine, in Santa Monica. Shorn of his trademark dreadlocks, and using a different name, he has managed to remain largely anonymous.

"Almost no one knows who I am. It's great," Williams, who is forty, said the other day, on campus. "But I could probably wear a Dolphins jersey and still be unknown here."

On his application, in the space provided for "personal accomplishments," he'd written, "Won a Heisman Trophy in 1998." (In parentheses, he explained that it was an award given to the best collegiate football player in the country.) But at a student-orientation session, when he and his two hundred classmates were asked to say something "special" about themselves, Williams mentioned only that he has a twin.

One morning in the school's herb lab, blue rubber gloves and a lab coat concealed Williams's huge tattooed arms. Jacques MoraMarco, the academic dean, walked in as Williams took stock of the lab's supply of *sheng jiang*—fresh ginger. MoraMarco noted that he had the Tibetan version of one of Williams's Sanskrit tattoos ("Om"). He added, "As a practitioner, Ricky will bring Chinese medicine to the forefront, like Michael Phelps did when he used the Chinese cupping technique at the Rio Olympics. Or Elvis Presley, with karate."



Ricky Williams

After the dean left, Karolyn Park, the lab's instructor, offered to show a visitor some herbs. "Can we meditate first?" Williams asked.

"Oh, yes," Park replied, and turned off the light. "Count to one hundred, then backward," she said. "If you lose count, start over." In an adjacent room, a paper shredder shrieked. The instructor and the student sat on stools, still and silent, for eleven minutes. Then they stood and started an inventory of the more than three hundred herbs on hand.

"We have pretty much all the herbs in the Chinese-medicine pharmacopoeia here in powder form," Williams said. He pointed at a bin. "This one stops bleeding. They go to different meridians or channels." He went on, "We learn the pinyin—which means the transliteration from the Chinese character." He gestured to a powder that he was using in a remedy for a patient who'd come to the school's clinic complaining of a stuffy nose. "The magnolia flower is *xin yi hua*," Williams said. "It opens the nasal orifices."

"That's hawthorn fruit, or *shan zha*," he said, pointing. "It relieves food stagnation—when you eat too much."

"Maybe good for N.F.L. players?" Park suggested.

Williams nodded: "Football players eat really bad food."

"There are things Chinese medicine calls herbs that aren't plants," he said. "These are radish seeds. This is chicken gizzard. Or there's gecko." He turned to Park. "Do we have turtle shell?"

Next, Williams came to cannabis seed. "We use this for constipation," he said. "In the ancient pharmacopoeia text, they mention cannabis flower, too. But then it became illegal and disappeared." He shook his head.

A visitor described trouble breathing at night.

"Is it inhaling or exhaling?" Park asked. "You might have a phlegm problem. How's your spleen?"

"Can I look at your tongue?" Williams asked. The visitor obliged. "It's cracked and red-tipped," Williams said. "Yin deficient. Do you drink a lot of coffee? You might want to cut that out."

—*Charles Bethea*

UNDER OUR FEET
SUBWAY ARCHEOLOGIST



One rainy afternoon, Philip Ashforth Coppola got on the No. 4 train heading toward Nevins Street, in Brooklyn. Taking a seat, he pulled a massive paperback labelled "Silver Connections: Volume III" from a tote bag, and began flipping through it. "Nevins Street is in here," he said. "I mean, I really went to town on this station."

The train's recorded announcement boomed: "This is . . . *Wall* Street."

Coppola started sketching the subway in 1978, when the stations were grungier and the cars were covered in graffiti. Passing through the Cortlandt Street station one day, he picked up a chunk of an old mosaic wall tile that had fallen onto the platform. "I realized, to my horror, that we're losing part of our subway to renovations," he recalled. "I thought, I'd better get a record made now, before it all disappears."

What began as a pastime soon became an obsession. At six self-published volumes, and two thousand pages, "Silver Connections" is an exhaustive visual history of the underground transit system. Inside are Coppola's ink sketches, with notes, of a hundred and ten stations. The drawings include meticulous keys to indicate the color of every tile. A selection of Coppola's work has just been published under the title "One-Track Mind." Now seventy, he hopes to complete all four hundred and seventy-two stations by the mid-twenty-thirties. "My goal is to get the whole thing done before I go," he said.

Coppola lives in Somerset, New Jersey, and works as a printing-press operator (he does his subway rounds on nights and weekends). He wears glasses and has a scruffy gray beard. He sketched Nevins Street in the nineties, just before a round of renovations, and he wanted to take another look. "They've concealed a lot of the stuff, so you can't see what you used to be able to see," he said.

"The next stop is . . . *Bowling Green*," the train said.

A man two seats away leaned over. "Are you the artist of the subway drawings?" he asked. He had just been to the Transit Museum's annex in Grand Central, which is exhibiting Coppola's drawings. "I was getting a birthday present for my son," the man said.

"Oh!" Coppola shouted, over the noise of the train. "Is he a transit fan?"

The man held up a onesie printed with the symbol for the 3 train.

Passing underneath Borough Hall, Coppola said, "This station is like the epitome of the Roman Empire. The main panel alone is fabulous. There are more details, festoons, and so forth. But the tulip-shaped sconces, they're long gone." Near Hoyt, he stood up, to look for a secret tunnel that he'd once drawn. He pressed his face to the glass. "No, no, forget it, we missed it," he said.

On the platform at Nevins Street, Coppola explained that the station was redesigned, in 1905, to make room for proposed connections that were never completed. A lower platform was added, and then left unused. Coppola went down some steps to a passageway leading to the uptown track. It was brightly lit and smelled of urine. He beamed. At a metal door, he stopped and peeked through a hole. The abandoned platform, and the suggestion of ornate mosaics, was just visible.

One day, years ago, when he was first drawing Nevins, he found the door open, and he slipped onto the lower platform with his camera. "There were no lights, and I randomly shot three pictures. I got a good one of an initial plaque, and a vague shot of the name panel," he said. "The panel here is more like the ones you see at Canal Street, Spring Street, and most other stations, after LaFarge"—Christopher LaFarge, the architect behind much of the early wall décor—"finally stopped doing different designs at each station." There's a terra-cotta relief of the Santa Maria under full sail at Columbus Circle, for instance, a bald eagle at Fourteenth Street, and a dignified beaver at Astor Place.

Upstairs, on the functional platform, Coppola began to sketch the "Nevins" name panel, on the trackside wall. "I keep three colors on me—blue, green, and red," he said, pulling out three pens. He squinted, toeing the platform edge as he sketched. A 2 train arrived, and commuters swarmed around him.

"This is late LaFarge," he shouted, counting the rows of tiles and noting their colors. "This is viridian, this is burnt orange, this thing here"—he pointed to a border near the top—"*ochre*."

"When I started this, I did a survey," he went on. He'd made a lapel pin that read "Subway Survey" and staked out four locations. "I'd ask people, 'Are you aware of the subway-station art?' Some people just said no, or they'd ask, 'You mean the advertising? The graffiti?' Some had a favorite station. One said that the Washington Metro is better." Coppola raised his eyebrows, incredulous: "A *shopping* mall!"

—*Anna Russell*



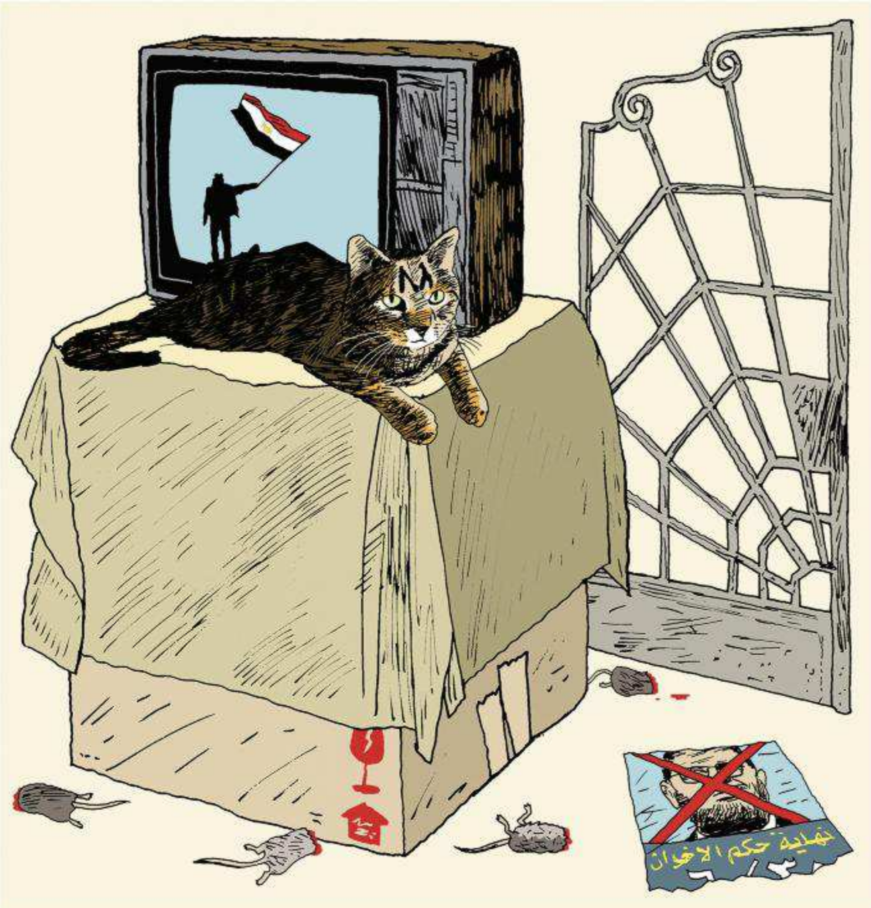
"Not to lecture, but the skull of your fallen enemy is reusable and much less wasteful."

PERSONAL HISTORY

MORSI THE CAT

Making a home in Cairo during a revolution.

BY PETER HESSLER



Egypt had held its first democratic Presidential election, won by Mohamed Morsi.

Natasha was the first of our daughters to get bitten by a rodent. It probably happened while she was sleeping, but she was too small to communicate anything. As with Ariel, her identical-twin sister, Natasha's early vocabulary was mostly English, but the girls used Egyptian Arabic for certain things—colors, animals, basic sustenance. *Aish* for bread, *maya* for water. If I twirled one of them around, she would laugh and shriek, "*Tani!*": "Again!" And then her sister would pick up the refrain, because anything that was done to one twin had to be repeated with the other. *Tani, tani, tani*. They weren't yet two years old.

I noticed the mark while changing Natasha. To the right of her navel, there were two pairs of ugly red puncture holes: incisors. Perhaps the animal had been nosing around the top of her diaper. If Natasha had cried out, neither I nor my wife, Leslie, heard.

We had moved to Cairo in October, 2011, during the first year of the Arab Spring. We lived in Zamalek, a neighborhood on a long, thin island in the Nile River. Zamalek has traditionally been home to middle- and upper-class Cairenes, and we rented an apartment on the ground floor of an old building that, like many structures on our street, was beautiful but fading. Out in front of the Art Deco façade, the bars of a wrought-iron fence were shaped like spiderwebs.

The spiderweb motif was repeated throughout the building. Little black webs decorated our front door, and the balconies and porches had webbed railings. The elevator was accessed through iron spiderweb gates. Behind the gates, rising and falling in the darkness of an open shaft, was the old-fashioned elevator box, made of heavy carved wood, like some Byzantine sarcophagus. The gaps in the webbed gates were as large as a person's head, and it was possible to reach through and touch the elevator as it drifted past. Not long after we moved in, a child on an upper floor got his leg caught in the elevator, and the limb was broken so badly that he was evacuated to Europe for treatment.

Safety had never been a high priority in old Cairo neighborhoods, but things were especially lax during the revolution. Electricity blackouts were common, and every now and then we had a day without running water. A pile of garbage next to the building attracted mice and rats. Below the windows of my daughters' room, I had seen weasels scurrying into a hole in the building's foundation.

At a medical clinic, a pediatrician examined the marks on Natasha's stomach. "Insect," she said.

I was incredulous. "That's an insect bite?"

"Maybe it was a flea," she said.

I sent a photograph to a family friend at a dermatology clinic in the United States. The response made me nostalgic for the American ability to apply cheerful language to any situation:

> Hi! We discussed in case conference today—all agreed . . . bite as fang by snake/rodent—hope this helps. Hope both are doing well. Hugs, Susie.

Leslie and I took a cab to the west bank of the Nile, where a vaccination center called Vacsera sold us a rabies vaccine. Then we found a new pediatrician. I also bought about a dozen glue traps.

At night, I set traps beneath the cribs. Sometimes I awoke to the sound of the twins' voices: "Daddy, mouse! Daddy, mouse!" Once, something rattled in their toy kitchen, so I opened the tiny refrigerator door, and a mouse popped out. How the hell had it got in there? None of the mice I trapped

ILLUSTRATION BY PETER ARKLE

seemed big enough to have made the bite marks, but they kept coming—*tani, tani, tani*. I drowned them one by one in a bucket of water.

When it was Ariel's turn to get bitten, the mark appeared on her back instead of on her stomach. Otherwise, it was identical to Natasha's: four incisors. We took another cab to Vacsera.

I was finished with traps. Leslie and I visited an expat who was giving away a male and a female cat. The choice was easy: the male was bigger, with a fierce expression, and he stalked lithely around the furniture. On his forehead, tiger stripes formed the shape of an "M"—a mark of the breed that's known as the Egyptian Mau.

We named him Morsi. Egypt had just held its first-ever democratic Presidential election, which had been won by Mohamed Morsi, a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. Not long after Morsi the cat arrived, he bit Leslie's arm hard enough to leave his own set of puncture wounds. *Tani*—back to Vacsera. After a year in Cairo, I was the only member of the family who hadn't received rabies shots.

Leslie and I met in Beijing, where we worked as journalists. We came from very different backgrounds: she was born in New York, the daughter of Chinese immigrants, whereas I had grown up in mid-Missouri. But some similar restlessness had motivated both of us to go abroad, first to Europe and then to Asia. By the time we left China together, in 2007, we had lived almost our entire adult lives overseas.

We made a plan: we would move to rural Colorado, as a break from urban life, and we hoped to have a child. Then we would go to live in the Middle East. We liked the idea of writing about another country with a deep history and a rich language, and we wanted this to be our first experience as a family.

All of it was abstract—the kid, the country. Maybe we'd go to Egypt, maybe Syria. Maybe a boy, maybe a girl. What difference did it make? An editor in New York warned me that Egypt, where Hosni Mubarak had ruled for almost thirty years, might seem too sluggish after China. "Nothing changes in Cairo," he said. But I liked the sound of that. I looked forward to studying Arabic in a country where nothing happened.

The first disruption to our plan occurred when one kid turned into two. In May, 2010, Ariel and Natasha were born prematurely, and we wanted to give them twelve months to grow before moving. The schedule didn't matter—a year in a newborn's life is a rush compared with never-changing Cairo. But, when protests broke out on Tahrir Square, our girls were eight months old, and they were exactly eighteen days older when Mubarak was overthrown.

We delayed and reconsidered, but finally we decided to go. We applied for life insurance, and the company carried out a medical screening but then rejected us on account of "extensive travel." We visited a lawyer and wrote up wills. We moved out of our rental house; we put our possessions in storage; we gave away our car. We didn't ship a thing—whatever we took on the plane was whatever we would have.

The day before we left, we got married. Leslie and I had never bothered with formalities; neither of us had any desire to organize a wedding. But we read somewhere that if a couple has different surnames the Egyptian authorities could make it difficult to acquire joint-residence visas. We left the babies with a sitter and drove to the Ouray County Courthouse. As the deputy county clerk started the ceremony, Leslie asked when the department that handled traffic violations would close.

"Four o'clock," the clerk said.

Leslie looked at her watch. "Can you hold on a minute?"

She ran upstairs to pay one last speeding ticket. The marriage license noted that we "did join in the Holy Bonds of Matrimony" at 4:08:44 P.M. I shoved the license into our luggage. The next day, along with our seventeen-month-old twins, we boarded the plane. Neither Leslie nor I had ever been to Egypt.

After Morsi arrived, the mice vanished. He ate the heads of a couple, leaving the bodies behind, and others stopped showing up. The coat markings of Egyptian Maus resemble those of cats that are portrayed on the walls of ancient tombs, and even the name is old: in pharaonic times, *mau* meant "cat." Maus are agile, and they are characterized by a flap of skin that extends from the flank to the hind leg, which allows for greater extension. These house cats have been clocked at speeds of up to thirty miles per hour.

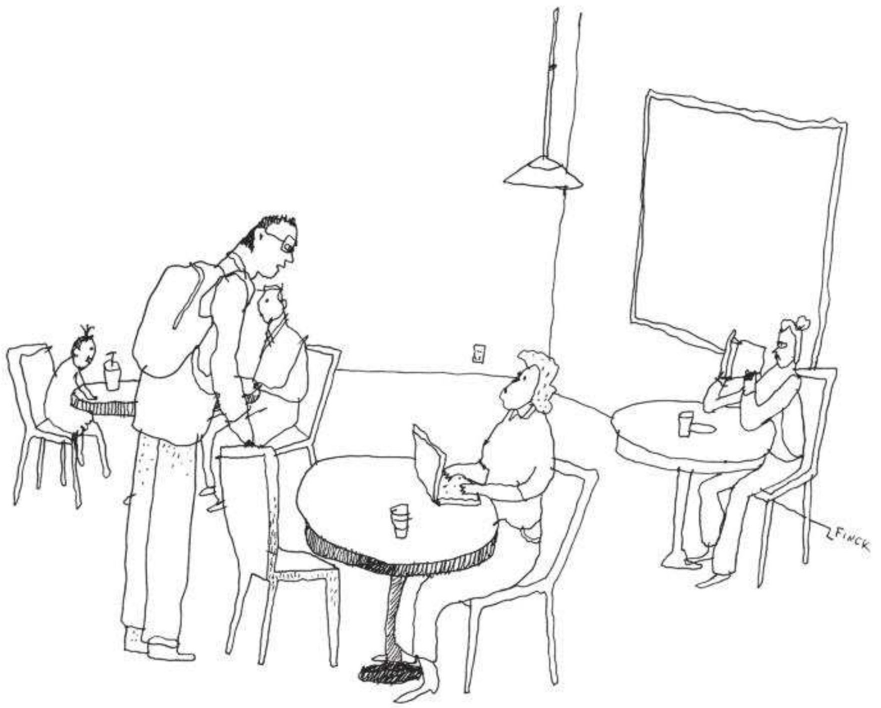
The toddlers, like the mice, learned to give Morsi a wide berth. He had no patience for their chattering and tail-pulling, and he scratched each of them hard enough to draw blood. This was handled efficiently: one attack on Ariel, one attack on Natasha. Leslie and I thought about having Morsi declawed, but it would have put him at a disadvantage against the neighborhood's rodents and stray cats.

It was impossible to keep him inside. He was strong enough to open screen windows and doors, and he hid around the apartment's entrance, waiting for an opportunity to dart out. Often I'd hear cat screams within minutes of his escape. We had a small garden, where strays liked to gather, but Morsi refused to tolerate them. Many times, I saw him drive some scraggly animal out through a gap in the spiderweb fence.

Sayyid, the neighborhood garbageman, warned me that somebody might grab Morsi. "He's a beautiful cat," Sayyid said. "*Qot beladi*." People often used this phrase—"a cat of the country"—when they saw Morsi and his stripes. Egyptians are believed to have been the first cat breeders in history, and they loved the animals so much that they forbade their export more than thirty-seven centuries ago. They used to call Phoenicians "cat thieves," because the seafarers snatched them for their ships.

In our building, an elderly woman on the fourth floor was the self-appointed cat carer, and she put out bowls of food for the animals. She always greeted me with a smile when I took the girls out for walks in their double stroller. Egyptians are even crazier about small children than they are about cats, and we attracted attention in Zamalek. Certain faces stood out: a one-eyed doorman, a tea deliveryman with a broken nose, a shopkeeper who liked talking to the twins in Arabic.

When the girls got bigger, they started throwing tantrums if their outfits didn't match. Leslie and I didn't want to dress them alike, but we were so overwhelmed by the adjustment to Egypt that we quickly



"Would you mind if I sit here and wait for you to leave?"

caved. We bought everything in pairs, and when the girls sat side by side in their stroller, wearing matching clothes, it felt like a kind of show.

Foreigners sometimes asked if I had seen "those other Zamalek twins." They were legendary: elderly Egyptian brothers who walked together around the island. They always dressed identically: nice jackets, button-front shirts. A couple of times, I tried to strike up a conversation, but the men ignored me. They never so much as glanced at the girls. Whenever we crossed paths—old twins, young twins; twins on foot, twins on wheels—I wondered how my kids were going to turn out after this odd childhood on the Nile.

Something about Zamalek's geography, and its old-money residents, seemed to draw out an Egyptian flair for eccentricity. The island is situated in the heart of the city, but the river creates a powerful sense of separation. Even on days of major demonstrations, it was easy to forget that Tahrir was only a mile and a half away. I often saw Zamalek residents watching the revolution on television, as if the images had been beamed in from some distant land.

Most people had no interest in getting involved. Sayyid told me cautionary tales about certain figures, like the one-eyed doorman. During a demonstration, the doorman walked to a street near Tahrir, where he decided to watch from an overpass. That was a mistake: when Egyptian police disperse crowds, they often fire their shotguns into the air. The doorman got hit with bird shot and lost his eye, and that was the last time he went to a protest.

"Your Brotherhood cat is doing a terrible job as President," Sayyid often said. The local veterinarian was a Coptic Christian, like approximately ten per cent of the country's population, and he feigned anger the first time Leslie brought Morsi in. "I hate this name," the vet said, grabbing the cat. Morsi fought fiercely whenever the Copt clipped his claws.

Soon the twins started differentiating between "the good Morsi" and "the bad Morsi." They picked this up from their nanny, Atiyat, who was also a Copt. Atiyat's opinion was hardly surprising: years before, Morsi had declared that neither a woman nor a Christian should be allowed to lead Egypt, and the country was a mess under his government. Half a year into his Presidency, at the beginning of 2013, we received a notice from the girls' nursery school:

> Due to the heavy smell of tear gas in Zamalek at the moment. We think it is safer for the children not to come to school today. . . . We are terribly sorry for the very short notice, but it is strictly out of our hands.

I started stashing large amounts of cash around the apartment. If things got violent, I had plans for an emergency departure: what we would pack, how we would get to the airport. By now, the protests were almost constant, and we lost electricity several times a day. The government announced a policy of dimming the lights in the airport; there were hardly any tourists. Whenever I returned from a trip, I touched down in the Morsi-era twilight zone: darkened hallways, frozen escalators. *It is strictly out of our hands.*

One morning, I went to renew our visas at Mogamma, the government building beside Tahrir. I chose a day when there weren't any protests, but the area still reeked of tear gas; by now, it seemed as if the flagstones had become so soaked with the stuff that they sweated it out in the heat. I handed our applications to an official.

"Where is your marriage license?" he said.

This was what mattered at such a time? Even more absurd was how pleased I felt: I was so happy that we had got married! I returned to Zamalek and retrieved the Ouray County license. The official seemed just as pleased as me; the visas were processed without a hitch.

When the coup finally came, in July, 2013, none of my planning mattered. General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, the Minister of Defense, issued a statement that gave Morsi forty-eight hours to respond to the demands of protesters. Morsi had a reputation for stubbornness, and it seemed impossible that he would negotiate.

On the day that everybody knew would be the last of the Morsi Presidency, Atiyat arrived with her fingernails painted in the colors of the Egyptian flag. She took out some red, black, and yellow crayons, and she instructed the twins in the production of little flags. Should my three-year-olds be

celebrating a military coup in advance? But I was too distracted to think about it; soon I would have to leave to cover the day's events.

Leslie and I ran through scenarios: What if it's impossible to make it home tonight, or if the cell-phone system goes down? What if things get violent? We decided that, in the event of gunfire, the safest place in the apartment was the interior hallway. That was the plan: shut the doors, stay close to the floor.

There was always a plan. Old plans had a way of becoming irrelevant, but new plans were easy to make, and Leslie and I often had other versions of this conversation. Once, the nursery school cancelled class because the police found a terrorist dummy bomb a block away. Another time, an ISIS-affiliated group kidnapped a foreigner on the outskirts of Cairo and beheaded him.

Before moving to Egypt, I had imagined that we would establish clear protocols: if *x* happens, then we will respond by doing *y*. This was how embassies operated; during the summer of the coup, the American Embassy in Cairo evacuated all nonessential personnel. But once we were living in the city, without a connection to any institution, I realized that we were more likely to respond as Cairenes did, with flexibility and rationalization. People talked about the events calmly, and they maintained a sense of distance—*it is strictly out of our hands*. They told jokes. They focussed on the little things they could control. Even a newcomer learned to normalize almost any situation. It was a dummy bomb, not a real bomb. The kidnapped foreigner was an oil worker, not a journalist. It happened only once. If it happens again, then we'll worry.

And the difficulties of everyday life kept people occupied. Things went wrong all the time, and usually it had nothing to do with politics. Our Arabic teacher died suddenly, because of poor medical care. The shopkeeper who chatted with the girls was shot and killed near his home, reportedly after trying to mediate some dispute. One day not long after the coup, the elderly cat carer on the fourth floor put out some food. She called to a cat on the landing below, but the animal didn't come. So she poked her head through a gap in the spiderweb gate, in order to look down through the elevator shaft. Above her, on one of the upper levels, the Byzantine box was motionless.

At that moment, on the ground floor, somebody pushed the call button.

Afterward, the police interrogated the doorman, and he either quit or was fired. As far as I could tell, he hadn't been at fault, but he made for an easy scapegoat. The landlady also had wire screens installed behind the spiderweb gates. On the fourth floor, the family of the elderly woman played recorded Quranic chants for months, to put her soul at peace. Leslie and I told Atiyat and our other sitters never to allow the twins to go on the landing unattended. During this time of violent headlines, one of the things that scared me most was the elevator outside my front door.

One winter, Morsi left and didn't come back. The morning after he disappeared, five ugly strays were lounging in the sun on our balcony. I wondered if Morsi had finally lost a fight, and I tossed water at the strays until they left. But still he didn't return. I remembered Sayyid's warning about somebody grabbing the cat.

The girls were upset. By now, they were big enough so that Morsi tolerated their presence; occasionally, he even showed affection. In the evenings, I walked the streets, saying, "Morsi! Morsi! Morsi!" People looked at me strangely. I was becoming another Zamalek eccentric, the foreigner who wandered the island at night, calling out for the deposed President.

Around this time, Leslie and I realized that we should stop discussing politics in front of the girls. During one of our trips to see family in the U.S., an uncle asked Ariel about her pet. "There is another Morsi who is a man, not a cat," Ariel said. "He was the President."

The uncle asked where Morsi was now.

"He is in prison."

"Why?"

"He sent some people to kill some other people," Ariel said, matter-of-factly. "There's another President now. I don't know if he is bad or good. But his name is Sisi."

Morsi, Sisi: I had a theory that it's a bad sign when Egyptian leaders sound like pets. After the great age of pyramid-building ended, in the twenty-fifth century B.C., the pharaohs who followed had names that seem "babyish" to our ears, as the Egyptologist Toby Wilkinson noted. During this period of declining authority, many kings could have been cats: Pepi, Teti, Nebi, Izi, Ini, Iti. Ibi built an itty-bitty pyramid, only sixty feet tall, but he didn't even put the stone casing on top. Pepi II ran the country into the ground. When an



"Let's have no discord, hon. We'd be playing right into the hands of the Russians."

expedition to the south reported the discovery of a Pygmy, this ineffective pharaoh responded as if he had glimpsed something shiny: "My Majesty wants to see this Pygmy more than the tribute of the Sinai and Punt!"

Someday, I thought, historians would view our current age as another example of bad-cat politics, crude and fable-like. Once upon a time, Morsi was in power, then Sisi drove him out like a stray in the garden. Then more than a thousand protesters were massacred in a brutal crackdown. Then Morsi was placed inside a cage in a courtroom, where he was tried for murder and treason. Could anybody blame a child for confusing these political figures with animals?

On the fifth day after Morsi's disappearance, I heard him mewing weakly. From our garden, I looked up and realized that he was stranded on an upper balcony. He had climbed there on the limb of a tree.

Leslie went up to the apartment. The woman who lived there refused to open the door, and she stood silently on the other side while Leslie introduced herself. Then the woman finally spoke. She threatened to call the police.

"She doesn't like to see people," the doorman told me. He said that the woman was probably afraid of the cat. He made an Egyptian gesture, tapping his head, rolling his eyes, and whistling: crazy.

The landlady also had no interest in dealing with the recluse. "Let's talk about this tomorrow," she said. For an hour, Leslie and I engaged in intense negotiations with the landlady, her daughter, and two doormen; finally, the six of us gathered outside the recluse's apartment. It was after 9 P.M. The woman opened the door partway.

She pointed at me. "You can come inside," she said. Then she pointed at Leslie and glared: "But not you!"

The place was cleaner than I expected. The woman was nice-looking, and she wore an elaborate dressing gown that made me think of Miss Havisham. I opened the balcony door and Morsi streaked across the apartment and leaped into Leslie's arms. I thanked the woman, but she ignored me. She was still staring fiercely at Leslie. She slammed the door.

"Do you have any idea what that was all about?" I asked.

"No," Leslie said.

At home, Morsi slept for most of three days. Sometimes he went to the sink and sucked on the faucet. The reclusive woman hired some workers to chop down every tree branch that was remotely close to her balcony. For good measure, they left the debris strewn around our garden.

We bought a new Honda sedan. In eastern Cairo, we scheduled a meeting with an agent at the insurance company Allianz, but at the last minute he called to say that he couldn't make it, because he had just totalled his vehicle. Another agent stepped in. While handling our application, she mentioned that she herself no longer qualified for auto insurance from Allianz, because she had had multiple accidents every year for three consecutive years. She handed us a glossy brochure that read "Our own data shows that six out of every ten cars purchased in Egypt will either be crashed, damaged, or stolen."

I paid for the auto insurance. They had a much better sales strategy than the life-insurance people in Colorado.

We took road trips to the Red Sea, to the Mediterranean, to Upper Egypt. The first time we visited ancient sites in Upper Egypt, in the south, the girls were transformed. They became obsessed with Akhenaten and Nefertiti, the king and queen who ruled during the fourteenth century B.C. The connection had something to do with the names—one "A," one "N"—but it was also the twinned iconography. Akhenaten and Nefertiti ruled with unusually equal status, and they were often portrayed together.

Such pairings run throughout ancient Egyptian art, theology, and politics: Osiris and Isis, Horus and Seth, king and queen, male and female, Upper and Lower, life and death. Antony and Cleopatra (and their twin offspring). Ray Johnson, an Egyptologist who directs the University of Chicago's research center in Luxor, told me that he believed the original inspiration was the divided landscape: the lush Nile valley next to barren desert. Whatever the source, it touches something deep in the human imagination, and after the twins' first visit to ancient sites they suddenly insisted on different outfits. Ariel, as Akhenaten, wore pants; Natasha wore dresses. We never worried about matching outfits again; the Eighteenth Dynasty had convinced the girls in a way that we never could have.

The long drives were as relaxing as anything I did in Egypt. Outside Cairo, politics disappeared; most places had experienced little or no violence during the Arab Spring. The tourist sites were largely abandoned. One year, we drove all the way to Abu Simbel, near the border of Sudan, and for the final stretch



"And then one day I thought, Being cute is great, but you know what's better? Being rich!"

the police required us to join an armed convoy. But after ten minutes the escort sped off, at more than a hundred miles an hour. Probably the officers had become bored; there wasn't any real risk in these remote places.

For nearly three hours, we drove through desert solitude. To the east, I saw bright pools of blue, which I assumed were inlets of Lake Nasser. But then I realized that the pools were mirages—I had never seen natural illusions that looked so real. Some of them had rocks poking up from the center, like islands in a lake.

When we arrived at Abu Simbel, we were the only visitors. The girls ran to the massive statues of Ramses the Great, and they played in the darkened halls of the temple. They were now five, and I had photographed them at ancient sites across the country. In almost every photograph, they were alone. I knew that someday these images would also feel mirage-like—twins in Abydos, twins in Esna, twins in the Valley of the Kings. Two tiny spots of pink on a plain, gazing up at the Colossi of Memnon.

As part of the ancient Egyptians' twinned world view, there were two words for time: *neheh* and *djet*. Scholars told me that modern people probably can't fully grasp these concepts. We're accustomed to linear time, with one event leading to another: a revolution, then a coup. The accumulation of these events, and the actions of the people who matter, is what makes history.

But ancient Egyptians never wrote history in the way that we would define it. Events—*kheperut*—were suspect, because they interrupted natural order. Instead, Egyptians lived in *neheh*, the time of cycles. *Neheh* is associated with the sun, the seasons, and the annual flooding of the Nile. It repeats; it recurs; it renews. *Djet*, on the other hand, is time without motion. When a pharaoh dies, he passes into *djet*, which is the time of the gods, the temples, and the pyramids. Mummification is a human response to *djet*, and so is art. Something in *djet* time is finished but not past; it exists forever in the present.

The years I spent in Egypt felt like the longest of my life. Outside in the city, governments came and went; inside the apartment, my children became unrecognizable from the toddlers we had brought to Cairo. As they grew, I realized that small children must come closest to living the time of the ancients. Things are repeated, in the manner of *neheh:* games, words, bedtime routines. *Tani, tani, tani*. And then



there's *djet*, the eternal present. My daughters had no concept of our life before Egypt, and they had no sense that it would ever end. They never questioned whether we belonged there. I often felt the stress of wanting to protect them, but their sense of normalcy was also reassuring. In Natasha's first-grade journals, blackouts were simply part of *neheh:*

> December 15, 2015—I was reading a book in night time when the electricity turned off.
> December 20, 2015—I went to the pyramids and we went inside. It was dark.
> December 27, 2015—I was done with breakfast when the lights went away.

The twins often told people that they were Egyptian. They had the body language of little Cairenes: for an emphatic "no," they said "*la'a,*" with a brisk shake of the head and a wave of the hand. Like virtually all Egyptians, they feared cold, rain, and silence. They talked constantly; it was impossible for the weather to be too hot for them. Once, a friend visited from Germany, and he thought it was hilarious that these Chinese-Americans kept saying, "We love Cairo!" But, for them, Egypt was *um al-duniya*, the mother of the world.

During our last year, we went to Jerusalem, where we toured underground sections of the Western Wall. At the site of some ancient cisterns, the guide asked the girls, "Where does water come from?"

"The Nile," Natasha said. The guide tried to nudge them toward the right answer, but they just stared blankly. According to Toby Wilkinson, in the entire corpus of ancient Egyptian literature the word "cloud" appears twice.

We left Cairo in the summer of 2016. We had lived there for half a decade, and now, in an election year, it seemed right to return to the U.S. After Morsi and Sisi, I looked forward to living in a country where the President behaved responsibly.

For the last month, the girls cried virtually every day. They cried about saying goodbye to Atiyat, to their school, to their bedroom. They worried about their cat staying behind. As far as they were concerned, leaving Egypt was the worst thing that Leslie and I had ever done to them.

Back in Ridgway, Colorado, we rented a double-wide trailer high in the mountains, surrounded by a forest of cedar. As the evenings grew cooler, field mice streamed into the double-wide. I started buying glue traps.

That fall, the second-grade class at Ridgway Elementary was given a writing assignment in which each student was asked to imagine a new name. Ariel wrote, "I wish my name was Ackananen because it is an old pharose name and it reminds me of Egypt." At an event for parents, a father with a rural accent asked me where we had moved from. He laughed at my answer. "You know, my kid told me there are two Egyptian girls in his class," he said. "I just figured he was lying."

Morsi was extradited from the Republic of Egypt at two-twenty in the morning on November 13, 2016, aboard Lufthansa Flight 581. Prior to transport, he was injected with three milligrams of diazepam and placed in a cat carrier. The veterinarian estimated that he would be unconscious for ten hours. The product description for the cat carrier included the words "sturdy construction."

After we left Egypt as a family, our flight connected in the United Kingdom, which has strict rules about animals being transported through its airports. So Morsi boarded with a friend in Cairo until Leslie returned for research. Periodically, the friend sent updates. The first read, "I've also found he is a bit of an escape artist, and so I have been making modifications to my apartment." Then: "He can

open my windows and balcony doors even with the addition of screens with sliding locks." Finally: "He's had feline company from vaccinated adult cats on and off, but I should warn you that he doesn't seem to like it. Morsi is quite aggressive toward other cats."

After the sedative was administered, Leslie caught a cab. Morsi woke up before they reached the Cairo airport. There was no problem going through security, but now he was making noise.

The flight departed on time. Leslie placed the carrier beneath her seat and fell asleep. At approximately three o'clock in the morning, she was jolted awake by the sound of people yelling, "Get that cat! Somebody grab that cat!" It's unclear how many other passengers were also awakened. But the ones who were conscious saw a small Chinese woman chasing a large Egyptian cat while shouting the name of a Muslim Brother who had been in prison for more than three years.

She caught him near the bathrooms. A German flight attendant was angry in the way that only German flight attendants can be angry. "What if somebody is allergic to cats?" she said repeatedly. But Leslie was more concerned about the carrier. Morsi had completely obliterated the thing.

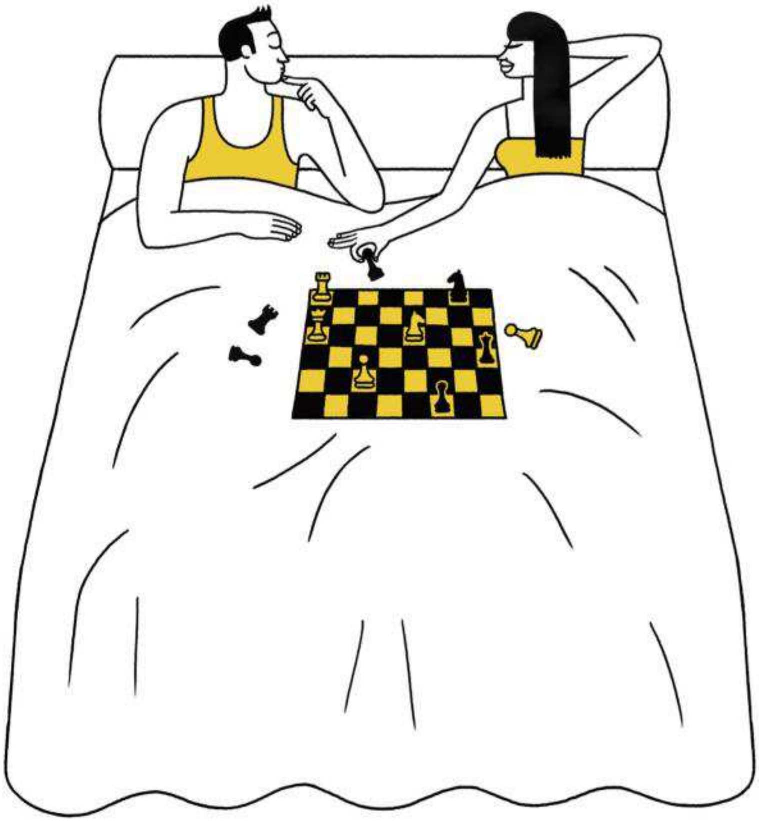
She sat down with the squirming cat on her lap. After this flight, she was scheduled for a layover of seven hours and thirty minutes, followed by a flight of ten hours and twenty minutes, a layover of six hours and thirty minutes, a flight of an hour and five minutes, and a ride in a van.

The man in the next seat liked cats. He held Morsi for a while. Later he e-mailed to request Morsi photographs to show his kids.

In Frankfurt Airport, Leslie walked around holding the cat until she found a shop that sold a hard-shell carrier. For the final flight, it was necessary to buy a soft container. All told, it took three cat carriers to get Morsi from Cairo to Ridgway.

On Morsi's first day as a Colorado trailer cat, he curled up with the girls on the couch. Soon headless mice started to appear. The first time it snowed, I threw open the door and told Morsi to run as far as he wanted into the forest. He crept up to the powder, sniffed it, and went back to the couch. ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS



LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

ABSTINENCE-ONLY PORN

BY BRUCE HANDY

The Trump Administration has moved in recent months to promote abstinence-only sex education in the nation's schools. Valerie Huber, the Department of Health and Human Services official who is overseeing this effort, explains, "As public health experts and policymakers, we must normalize sexual delay." Surely the adult-film industry can do its part, too.

SCENE 1: *Alexis St. John, an attractive lady in a revealing outfit, is lounging on a white leather couch in her North Hollywood condo. The doorbell rings. Alexis gets up and opens the door. Jeff Ryder, a handsome delivery guy, is holding a pizza box.*

Jeff: You ordered a pizza?
Alexis: I did. Come on in while I find my purse, so I can tip you.

(*Jeff closes the door behind him and puts the pizza on the kitchen island. It is promptly forgotten by everyone concerned.*)

Alexis: Oh dear. I can't find my purse. . . . If only there were some *other way* I could tip you.

Jeff: Some other way? I can think of one.
Alexis: Oh? What did you have in mind?
Jeff (*cocking an eyebrow*): Well . . . I see you have a French horn.

(*Cut to a French horn on a stand in the corner of the room, next to a potted bird-of-paradise.*)

Jeff: You look like you're a good French-horn player.
Alexis: I am a *very* good French-horn player. Would you like me to . . . play something?
Jeff: I'd like that. I'd *really* like that. How about . . . Mozart's Horn Concerto No. 2 in E-Flat Major?
Alexis: Mmm, Mozart . . .

(*Alexis gets the French horn, sits down, assumes whatever the correct French-horn-playing posture is, and begins playing Mozart's Horn Concerto No. 2 in E-Flat Major.*)

Jeff (*ad-libbing throughout*): Mmm . . . yeah . . . oh, yeah . . . nice . . . that sounds so *good* . . . I bet you went to Juilliard. . . . Did you go to Juilliard?

(*Alexis finishes playing Mozart's Horn Concerto No. 2 in E-Flat Major.*)

Alexis: Oberlin.
Jeff: Oberlin . . . *yes.*
Alexis: Well, I can tell you liked that.
Jeff: I did. I did like that. It was so much more satisfying than anything else I can think of. But now I'd better get back to delivering pizzas to married couples with children.
Alexis: Godspeed!

SCENE 2: *Two young men—Bobby Diesel, a buff guy with great abs, and Rick Wood, a slightly less buff guy, but also with great abs—are in a locker room. They are nude, except for towels around their waists.*

Bobby (*making conversation*): It's quiet in here today.
Rick: It is.
Bobby: It's like . . . we're the only two guys in the locker room.
Rick: Hmm, that's funny. . . . Alone in a locker room . . .
Bobby: Well, since we're alone in a locker room, can I confess something? I've been watching you.
Rick: You have?
Bobby: Yes, and I think you've got . . . *a big secret*.
Rick: I don't know what you mean . . . or do I?
Bobby: What I mean is, I've noticed you know how to tie a Windsor knot. I've only ever been able to manage a four-in-hand. What's your secret?
Rick: Oh, *that*. It's all in how you loop the wide end of the tie around the narrow end and then tuck it through the knot.
Bobby: Can you show me how you loop and tuck it?
Rick: Well, I've never done this with another guy before. But sure . . . I'll show you *exactly* how I loop and tuck it.

(*Rick takes his tie from his locker and shows Bobby how he ties a Windsor knot. Bobby then tries it himself.*)

Bobby: Like *that*?
Rick: *Just* like that. You have to reach around, like *this*. (*He demonstrates.*)
Bobby: Oh, *yeah*. That works.
Rick: I thought you would like it.
Bobby: I like it very much.

(*The demonstration concludes.*)

Rick: I'm glad we used our time alone in a gym so productively, rather than descending into horseplay or such. But I'd better get dressed now. I have a date with my steady girlfriend.
Bobby: You have a steady girlfriend? I have a steady girlfriend, too!
Rick and Bobby (*together*): We both have steady girlfriends!

SCENE 3: *Another attractive lady in a revealing outfit, Kendra Madison, is lounging on the white leather couch in the North Hollywood condo from Scene 1. The doorbell rings. Kendra opens the door. It's Rick Wood, from the gym.*

Rick: Hi, Kendra. Is Alexis ready for our date?
Kendra: Oh, hi, Rick. Come in. Alexis is still getting dressed.

(*Rick enters and sits down next to Kendra on the white leather couch. There is a prolonged, uncomfortable silence, as if there were something unspoken between them.*)

Rick: Alexis is taking a while, isn't she?
Kendra: I could help you . . . pass the time.
Rick: Oh? What did you have in mind?
Kendra: Well, I know it's not right, but I sometimes have these fantasies . . . about playing chess with you.
Rick: Chess, huh? I bet you're a pretty sweet player. But I don't know. . . . Alexis might not like it. She's awfully jealous about chess.
Kendra: Just a quick game . . . What Alexis doesn't know won't hurt her.

(*Rick signals his assent by pulling out a chess clock from his pants. Kendra retrieves a chess set, which is next to the French horn and the bird-of-paradise. She and Rick begin playing chess slowly, then more quickly.*)

Rick: I like the way you moved your bishop. That's a *good move*.
Kendra: Mmm. You can take my knight if you want.

(*Alexis enters.*)

Alexis: My boyfriend! My roommate! Playing *chess!*
Rick (*trying to cover the board*): It was just a friendly game!
Alexis: Kendra, you filthy, indiscriminate chess player!
Kendra: I'm sorry! I *am* a filthy, indiscriminate chess player. Rick never would have played if I hadn't begged him.
Alexis (*calming down*): Well, you know, maybe it would be interesting . . . if we all played chess . . . *together.*
Rick (*raising his eyebrows*): A three-way chess game?
Alexis: I've always wanted to try playing chess with a man and another woman.
Kendra: I did once, at Oxford.

(*Alexis sits down. They all ponder the chessboard.*)

Alexis: Should I move the rook, or do you want to move the rook?
Rick: I don't know what to do with this pawn.
Kendra: Whose queen is that? Did you just castle?
Alexis (*shaking her head*): This is so wrong. We're making a mockery of what should be a beautiful game.

(*Kendra and Rick nod in agreement. Alexis begins putting away the chess set.*)

Alexis: I guess we've learned that chess is best played by two people, after all.
Rick: Two people in a committed chess-playing relationship. Anyone hungry?
Kendra: I'll order a pizza.
Alexis: I know the pizza guy. He's handsome, and he's fond of the French horn.
Rick: Maybe he could be a fourth . . .
Alexis: Rick?
Rick: For bridge!

(*They all laugh.*) ♦

ANNALS OF TECHNOLOGY

DIGITAL VIGILANTES

If your files are stolen by hackers, why is it illegal to steal them back?

BY NICHOLAS SCHMIDLE



One day in the summer of 2003, Shawn Carpenter, a security analyst in New Mexico, went to Florida on a secret mission. Carpenter, then thirty-five, worked at Sandia National Laboratories, in Albuquerque, on a cybersecurity team. At the time, Sandia was managed by the defense contractor Lockheed Martin. When hundreds of computers at Lockheed Martin's office in Orlando suddenly started crashing, Carpenter and his team got on the next flight.

The team discovered that Lockheed Martin had been hacked, most likely by actors affiliated with the Chinese government. For several years, operatives tied to China's military and intelligence agencies had been conducting aggressive cyberespionage against American companies. The problem hasn't gone away: in 2014, the Justice Department indicted five hackers from the People's Liberation Army for stealing blueprints from electrical, energy, and steel companies in the United States. Keith Alexander, the former National Security Agency director, and Dennis Blair, the former director of National Intelligence, recently wrote in the *Times* that "Chinese companies have stolen trade secrets from virtually every sector of the American economy."

Examining the Orlando network, Carpenter discovered several compressed and encrypted files that were awaiting exfiltration, "rootkits" that the hackers had used to cloak their intrusions, and malware—malicious software—that appeared to be "beaconing" to a server in China. Carpenter's manager had long encouraged him and his team to act as if they were "world-class hackers" themselves. In order to determine what the culprits might have taken, Carpenter proposed "hacking back"—getting into the thieves' computer networks without authorization. To his frustration, officials at Sandia feared that doing so might invite additional attacks or draw attention to the original breach, and neither outcome would be good for business. More important, hacking back is against the law.

Any form of hacking is a federal crime. In 1986, Congress enacted the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, which prohibits anyone from "knowingly" accessing a computer "without authorization." The legislation was inspired, oddly enough, by the 1983 film "WarGames." In the movie, Matthew Broderick plays a hacker who breaks into the Defense Department's network and, by accident, nearly starts a nuclear war. Ronald Reagan saw the film and was terrified, as were other politicians, who vowed to act.

Carpenter's team scrubbed malware from Lockheed Martin's computers, and flew back to Albuquerque. But Carpenter, a lean, excitable man who speaks in tangent-filled bursts, wasn't ready to move on to other projects—he wanted to keep chasing the criminals. At home, he quietly continued his investigation. Every night, once his wife went to bed, Carpenter drank coffee, chewed Nicorette, and schemed about ways to outwit the hackers.

He decided to build a trap for them, by creating government files that appeared to belong to a contractor who was carelessly storing them on his home computer. The files were "honeypots"—caches of documents that fool hackers into thinking they are inside a target's system when they are actually inside a replica. Carpenter stocked the honeypots with intelligence documents—they were all declassified, but that wouldn't immediately be clear to a reader—and created fictitious search histories for his

Estimates suggest that ninety per cent of American companies have been hacked.

ILLUSTRATION BY GOLDEN COSMOS

made-up contractor. "A lot of configuration was done to make it all look real," he told me.

Soon after his project went live, Carpenter noticed that visitors were hacking in to steal the documents. He trailed them as they left. He thought that doing this might be risky, and not trivially so: violations of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act can lead to prison sentences of up to twenty years. "I had a fairly decent understanding of the law," Carpenter said. "But I knew I had no intent for financial gain. And I was pissed that they were stealing all this shit and nobody could fucking *do* anything."

In the years since Carpenter went after the hackers, the legal prohibitions on hacking haven't changed. But now, in the wake of enormous cyberattacks on such companies as Uber, Equifax, Yahoo, and Sony—and Russian hackers' theft of e-mails from the Democratic National Committee's server—some members of Congress are trying to pass a significant revision of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act. The changes would permit companies, and private citizens, that are victims of cybercrimes to hack back.

By some estimates, ninety per cent of American companies have been hacked. At a cybersecurity conference in 2012, Robert Mueller, at that time the director of the F.B.I., said, "There are only two types of companies: those that have been hacked and those that will be." Government agencies, such as the N.S.A. and the Department of Homeland Security, are responsible for defending government networks. But private companies are largely left to defend themselves on their own.

For help, the private sector is increasingly calling on the cybersecurity industry. Many of these firms are staffed by former N.S.A. employees. Some firms view themselves as masons, helping clients build stronger walls; others see themselves as exterminators, hunting for pests. Many cybersecurity firms offer what is called "active defense." It is an intentionally ill-defined term. Some companies use it to indicate a willingness to chase intruders while they remain inside a client's network; for others, it is coy shorthand for hacking back. As a rule, firms do not openly advertise themselves as engaging in hacking back. "It's taboo," Gadi Evron, the C.E.O. of Cymmetria, a honeypot developer, said. Yet Cymmetria's vice-president of operations, Jonathan Braverman, told me that most major cybersecurity companies "dance at the limits of computer trespassing every single day of the week."

Shawn Carpenter, the Sandia employee, was determined to help illuminate a dark world that seemed to be undermining U.S. interests. And, as he later told *Computerworld*, "the rabbit hole went much deeper than I imagined."

Chasing the hackers was difficult, in part, because the Internet enables anonymity. Encryption, virtual private networks, and pseudonyms shroud the identity of even benign users. Hackers can further thwart efforts to identify or catch them by leapfrogging from one "hop point" to another. If hackers in Bucharest want to steal from a bank in Omaha, they might first penetrate a server in Kalamazoo, and from there one in Liverpool, and from there one in Perth, and so on, until their trail is thoroughly obscured. Jason Crabtree, the C.E.O. of Fractal Industries, a cybersecurity company in northern Virginia, said, "The more that someone wants to prevent attribution, the more time they'll invest in making it difficult to know where the attack came from." A sophisticated hacker, he said, might hop as many as thirty times before unleashing an attack.

Carpenter was aware of such tricks, and so he didn't like stepping away from his computer at night. Whenever the hackers—who worked when it was daytime in eastern China—were online, he tried to be online, too. He began sleeping just a few hours a night, and in May, 2004, after ten months of investigation, he finally cracked the case. He followed the hackers to a server in South Korea, then used a "brute force" application that kept guessing at the server's password until it landed on the right one, allowing Carpenter to hack in. On the server, he found beacons and other tools, in addition to several gigabytes' worth of stolen documents—the equivalent of millions of pages—relating to sensitive U.S. defense programs. Among them were blueprints and materials for two major Lockheed Martin projects: the F-22 Raptor, a stealth fighter plane commissioned by the Air Force, and the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter, which was launched by NASA in 2005. Finally, Carpenter discovered that the South Korean server was merely a hop point—and when he followed the trail to the end he arrived at the gateway of a network in Guangdong, China.

Carpenter was tempted to share his discoveries with Lockheed Martin or with Sandia, but he wasn't sure how officials would react to his freelance sleuthing. Some of the documents stolen by the Chinese included details on U.S. troop movements and body-armor specifics, which seemed to him to be a matter of national security. He got in touch with the F.B.I. Carpenter knew that he had waded into perilous legal terrain, and thought that the Bureau could give him some cover, and insure that he didn't wind up in jail.

An F.B.I. agent named David Raymond was given the case. He was astounded by Carpenter's findings—and, according to Carpenter, not particularly troubled by how he had obtained them. Raymond authorized him to hack back against certain targets. "I've got eight open cases throughout the United States that your information is going to," Raymond told him. Carpenter's leads had begun feeding at least three clandestine Army operations, Raymond told him, adding, "You have caused quite a stir, in a good way."

Nevertheless, Carpenter and his wife, Jennifer Jacobs, who also worked at Sandia, as a nuclear scientist, were anxious. Raymond had told Carpenter that the Bureau would take care of him, saying, "You're very important to us." He told Carpenter that the F.B.I. had a letter from the Justice Department promising not to charge him with hacking. "We're not going to prosecute," Raymond assured him.

Jacobs was not assuaged. She wanted a statement, in writing, that confirmed Raymond's promise. Without it, she feared, the F.B.I. could turn on her husband at any point and accuse him of hacking and wiretapping. To protect himself, Carpenter installed microphones around his house to record his interactions with Raymond and other agents.

In late 2004, the F.B.I. informed Sandia's head of counterintelligence,

Bruce Held, a retired C.I.A. officer, that Carpenter had been helping the Bureau on various cases. Held met with Carpenter on January 7, 2005, and chided him. According to Carpenter, he said, "If I were your manager, I would have decapitated you! You would have at least left my office bloody." Carpenter was soon fired for "being insubordinate" in "violation of the law," and for the "utilization of Sandia information outside of Sandia."



In August, 2005, Carpenter sued Sandia for wrongful termination. He argued that he had simply disclosed the Chinese hackers' thievery to "appropriate federal officials," and had assisted authorities "in the investigation of suspected criminal activities." (Sandia and Lockheed Martin declined to comment for this article.)

A trial was held in February, 2007. Although the proceedings were not explicitly a deliberation on the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, they offered an indirect test of Americans' tolerance for well-intended digital vigilantism. The jury sided with Carpenter, and awarded him $4.7 million in damages. His lawyer, Thad Guyer, argued in his closing statement, "Mr. Carpenter was not somebody . . . who became bored with his administrative-nature job and then just started trying to become a cybersleuth. . . . His had to do with protecting the national security."

Companies are understandably reluctant to send out sheepish notifications informing the public that hackers have stolen customers' personal data—it's bad for stock prices, and it implies impotence. James Bourie, a cybersecurity entrepreneur, told me, "Companies are tired of being passive and defensive. They want to be more proactive, but a lot of them don't know what's illegal and what's not—or even what's within the art of the possible."

Bourie, who is thirty-eight, is a former Special Forces officer, and served several tours in Afghanistan. While there, he was struck by the power of digital weapons: military jets routinely flew overhead, using electronic pulses to detonate hidden bombs before they could kill American soldiers. When he left the Army, in 2011, he decided to start a cybersecurity company, the Nisos Group, whose digital investigations would be buttressed by "HUMINT"—human intelligence. He partnered with two former intelligence officers, and they hired operators with intelligence backgrounds.

The company, based in Alexandria, Virginia, created a brochure promoting its expertise in "attribution of threat actors" and "recovery of stolen data." Bourie told me, "We go as far to the edge as the law will allow."

He soon discovered that some clients wanted Nisos to go beyond the edge. Not long ago, he spoke with the C.E.O. and the general counsel of a multinational corporation. A former employee there had not relinquished his company laptop upon his departure, and he was suspected of having shared proprietary information with a competitor. The C.E.O. asked Bourie if he could hack into the former employee's home network, assess whether the company laptop was connected to it, and, if so, erase any sensitive files.

From a technical standpoint, Bourie knew, such a hack would not be difficult. His colleagues routinely helped companies improve their security protocols by performing "penetration tests" on their networks—breaking in and documenting vulnerabilities. Last year, Nisos did such a test on behalf of a major financial institution. Two of Bourie's colleagues went to a café across the street from the client's headquarters, where employees often stopped in for coffee. One of the Nisos operators, carrying a messenger bag with a radio-frequency identification device concealed inside it, surreptitiously scanned the facility code from employees' I.D. badges. With this information, Nisos could make fake badges. The next day, the Nisos operators swiped into the lobby, plugged a local-area-network device into an Ethernet port in a conference room, and left before anyone noticed. Using the LAN connection, they hacked into the financial institution's network and, among other things, briefly commandeered its security cameras. The company realized that it needed to make serious upgrades to its network.

According to Bourie, when the C.E.O. of the multinational corporation asked him if Nisos could hack into the ex-employee's home network, the general counsel interrupted to say that the C.E.O. was obviously kidding—hacking the network would be illegal. The C.E.O. said, "Illegal *how*? Running-a-stop-sign illegal? Or killing-someone illegal?"

Bourie recalled that everyone laughed, and the question was left hanging. But it stuck with him, because he wasn't sure of the answer. He knew that no firm had ever been prosecuted for hacking back, but he didn't know why. Were the companies that did it simply too savvy to get caught? Did law-enforcement agencies not consider it a serious crime? (According to a spokesman for Nisos, the company "has never and will never engage in action which violates U.S. and international law.") A former Justice Department official told me recently that the optics would be "awfully poor" if the department prosecuted a company that had retaliated against foreign hackers. "That'd be a very difficult case to make," he said. "How would that look? '*We* can't catch these foreign hackers, but when a bank tries to hack back we prosecute *them*'? I can't imagine a jury convicting anyone for that."

In the late aughts, pirates off the coast of Somalia were hijacking a ship a week. Maritime firms began protecting their cargo and crews with armed guards. Bullets were fired. The number of hijackings fell. There were none in 2013, or in the two years after that.

Last year, Wyatt Hoffman and Ariel Levite, researchers at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, wrote a report suggesting that the tactics used to combat pirates contain "relevant insights for cybersecurity." Like the Gulf of Aden, they argue, the Internet is a "quasi-anarchic" domain, and people assuming the risks of conducting business there should be allowed to defend themselves.

Hoffman and Levite contend that it is time to reconsider the illegality of

some active-defense measures that "generate effects outside of the defender's network." They mention both beacons and "dye packets," the digital equivalent of the exploding ink cannisters that bank employees use to mark stolen cash. With dye packets, code can be embedded in a file and activated if the file is stolen, rendering all the data unusable. Currently, Hoffman and Levite write, it would be an act of "considerable legal ambiguity" to use dye packets.

Dave Aitel, a former N.S.A. programmer who runs a penetration-testing firm called Immunity, told me that the matter was "simple," and added, "If you're doing investigatory things, and learning things that people don't want you to learn, then you're probably executing code on someone else's machine. And, if you're executing code on someone else's machine, that means you're hacking back."

Hoffman and Levite aren't alone in making the case for reviewing settled law. In 2016, Jeremy Rabkin, a law professor, and Ariel Rabkin, a computer scientist, co-authored a paper for Stanford's Hoover Institution, in which they wrote, "The United States should let victims of computer attacks try to defend their data and their networks through counterhacking." Stewart Baker, who was the general counsel at the N.S.A. during the Clinton Administration, told me, "Hacking is a crime problem and a war problem. You solve those problems by finding hackers and *punishing* them. When they feel their profession isn't safe, they'll do it less."

Last year, hack-back advocates gained their strongest ally yet when Representative Tom Graves, a Republican from Georgia, submitted a bill to the House that proposes to legalize several measures currently prohibited by the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act. According to the bill, private firms would be permitted to operate beyond their network's perimeter in order to determine the source of an attack or to disrupt ongoing attacks. They could deploy beacons and dye packets, and conduct surveillance on hackers who have previously infiltrated the system. The bill, if passed, would even allow companies to track people who are thought to have done hacking in the past or who, according to a tip or some other intelligence, are planning an attack.

"This is an effort to give the private sector the tools they need to defend themselves," Graves told me. A former real-estate developer, he was elected to Congress in 2010. At his Capitol Hill office, which I visited recently, a yellow "DON'T TREAD ON ME" banner was draped on a bookshelf. He said, "For far too long, hackers have been hiding in the darkness—the dark Web, dark basements—and we're about to shine a little light in there."

Graves is the chairman of the financial-services subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee. Several years ago, bank officials began complaining to him about cybersecurity. Even when banks "bought the antivirus software and got all the patches," Graves recalled, criminals often found their way in—"And, when you're getting breached, what can you do?" He went on, "A lot of companies wanted to do more, and had the skills and the tools to do more, but didn't know if they *could*. And some were taking extra steps but didn't know if they *should*."

Between 2011 and 2013, dozens of banks were attacked by Iranian hackers allegedly working on behalf of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. During this period, the hackers repeatedly crashed the Web sites of Bank of America, Wells Fargo, and JPMorgan Chase, among others. A federal indictment claims that the attacks caused millions of dollars in damage and profit losses. The N.S.A. knew in advance of the Iranians' intent to penetrate the banks. Richard Ledgett, a former deputy director of the N.S.A., told me that the government has "all kinds of visibilities and vantages" into foreign computer networks. In this case, the N.S.A. detected bots checking into a server and forming the sort of digital army that is typically used to wage distributed denial-of-service attacks, in which hackers crash a network by overwhelming it with visitors. Intercepts confirmed the agency's technical assessment. The N.S.A. informed the F.B.I., which then warned the banks.

To survive the onslaught, the banks turned to services that mitigate such attacks—largely by providing extra server space for processing bot traffic. One of the people who helped the banks



was Shawn Carpenter, who, after leaving Sandia, eventually became a chief technical analyst for iSIGHT Partners, a leading cyberintelligence firm. Several of the banks hired iSIGHT, and Carpenter told me that the firm was analyzing Iranian malware as soon as it hit its clients' networks. In many cases, iSIGHT's analysts discovered bugs in the malware that could be manipulated and used against the hackers. Carpenter recalls iSIGHT informing its customers, "For research purposes only, of course, but if you were to send this malformed packet to one of those nodes, it would crash all of them." Carpenter told me that he had no idea what any iSIGHT clients did with that information. (In a statement, iSIGHT said that it "does not support or engage in any type of 'hack back' operations." The company noted that it "prioritizes customer confidentiality," and therefore could "not admit, deny or comment on whether any particular organization is a customer"; nor could it discuss "the specific nature of any work we may have done.")



In March, 2013, while the Iranian attacks were going on, bank executives gathered in Washington to meet with officials from the Obama White House, the Treasury Department, and the F.B.I. Kelly King, the C.E.O. of BB&T Bank, declared, "Ladies and gentlemen, we are at *war!*" At another meeting, a JPMorgan official proposed hacking back to disable servers that were launching the Iranian attacks. F.B.I. agents were troubled by this suggestion, and after opening an investigation they found that some of the proposed sites had already been targeted. As Bloomberg News later reported, the agents questioned JPMorgan officials, who denied any wrongdoing. (Charges were never filed.)

Representative Graves learned of the Iranian attacks. The sequence of events struck him as ludicrous: a U.S. intelligence agency knew that an attack was coming but failed to stop it. And now a victimized company was being investigated for possibly having taken defensive action.

While developing his bill, Graves spoke to Keith Alexander, the former N.S.A. director, who discussed changes that could be made to U.S. law. He also spoke with representatives from a new firm called [redacted]. The C.E.O. of [redacted], Max Kelly, is a former Facebook executive and N.S.A. operator. On LinkedIn, he describes himself as a specialist in "hacking," "breaking stuff," and "doing impossible things." At the moment, Kelly's company, perhaps more than any other, seems to be willing to enter uncertain legal territory. Three former intelligence officers told me that someone who worked at [redacted] had boasted to them, privately, about performing hack-back jobs at the company. "The government is unwilling or unable to do what needs to be done, to protect U.S. companies who are on the front line of cyberwarfare," Kelly said last year to the Web site Deadline, which was reporting on the North Korean hack of Sony. He added, "That's why I left to start this company." ("I wouldn't define what we do as hack back," Kelly told me. "We take legal technical measures to identify attackers and cause them consequences.")

Graves, who is also a member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, believes that the private sector deserves some of the "flexibility" that military and intelligence agencies enjoy. Government operators hack into the networks of foreign governments all the time. They have even created such cyberweapons as Stuxnet—the worm, reportedly designed by U.S. and Israeli intelligence, that targeted computers associated with Iran's nuclear program and caused damage to hundreds of uranium centrifuges. At a conference last summer, Lieutenant General Vincent R. Stewart, currently a deputy commander at United States Cyber Command—which oversees the military's cyber capabilities—said, "Once we've isolated malware, I want to reëngineer it and prep to use it against the same adversary who sought to use it against us." The N.S.A.'s recruiting strategy relies, in part, on appeals to mischievousness: at conferences, agency representatives often pitch prospective applicants by promising work that might otherwise land them in jail.

In October, 2016, Tom Graves formally introduced the Active Cyber Defense Certainty Act. Members of the press began referring to it as the Hack-Back Bill. Graves expressed confidence that the legislation would eventually pass. "We're approaching this from a bipartisan perspective, and I think we're about there," he told me. His co-sponsor is Kyrsten Sinema, a Democrat from Arizona. Soon after introducing the bill, Graves found seven additional Democratic and Republican sponsors, including Trey Gowdy, the Republican from South Carolina, who sits on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

Graves also was counting on backing from the Trump Administration. "They're excited that someone is leaning forward on this topic," he said. In January, during testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, the Secretary of Homeland Security, Kirstjen Nielsen, said that her department was prepared to work with the private sector to deploy active-defense tools against cyberintruders. She added that she'd want to ask companies if there were any legal barriers "that would prevent them from taking measures to protect themselves." Graves was delighted when he heard this. Because of President Trump's business instincts and anti-regulation views, Graves said, his bill was "right in the Administration's wheelhouse." In a press release, Graves characterized Nielsen's statement as "a positive step forward for an America First cyber policy."

But, as with many policy debates, from North Korea to immigration, the Trump Administration does not appear to have only one view on hacking back. Graves told me that he'd had "some great conversations" with White House officials, but Rob Joyce, Trump's top cybersecurity adviser, seemed less enthusiastic.

"We have reservations and concerns," Joyce told me. He is a veteran of the N.S.A.'s élite Tailored Access Operations unit, where he spent years hacking governments and terrorist organizations. But he said he worries that Graves's bill, if it passed, could inspire an epidemic of "vigilantism." Even if

hacking back were to be authorized "in a prescribed way, with finite-edge cases," he said, "you're still going to have unqualified actors bringing risk to themselves, their targets, and their governments." (In April, Joyce notified the White House that he plans to return to the N.S.A.)

Joyce is not alone in urging restraint. Last spring, during a congressional hearing on cyber capabilities and emerging threats, Admiral Michael S. Rogers, then the director of the N.S.A., told Representative Jim Cooper, of Tennessee, that he was wary of Graves's proposal. "Be leery of putting more gunfighters out on the streets of the Wild West," he said. "We've got enough cyber actors out there already."

Graves told me, "We love it when people say, 'This would only create the Wild West.' The Wild West currently *exists!* We're only asking for a neighborhood watch—an extra set of eyes and ears, to notify law enforcement so they can do their job a little bit quicker." Such rhetoric appears to endorse the citizen-hacker model suggested by the Shawn Carpenter case. But a Justice Department spokesman told me that private actors could easily "undermine" law-enforcement investigators with their meddling.

Richard Ledgett, the former N.S.A. deputy director, told me that the private sector had become foolishly optimistic about the potential of identifying hackers and hacking back. He said, "Attribution is really hard. Companies have come to me with what they *thought* was solid attribution, and they were wrong." Ledgett also raised concerns about what military strategists call "escalation dominance." Don't pick a fight, the theory goes, unless you know you can win it. What makes hacking back so problematic, Ledgett said, is the difficulty of seeing what a company is up against. How many hop points is your opponent using? Are you tangling with a lone hacker? Or a criminal gang? Or a lone hacker who's been hired by a criminal gang that works for a foreign intelligence service?

Eran Reshef, a former Israeli intelligence officer, has learned the dangers of fighting a shadowy opponent online. In 2004, he co-founded a company called Blue Security, which he marketed as the ultimate anti-spamming service. Subscribers to Blue Security became part of a mutually protective community; whenever a member received a piece of spam, it was automatically forwarded to all the others, which simultaneously returned the message to its sender, overwhelming the spammer's server. It was essentially a distributed denial-of-service attack in reverse.

Blue Security's service was starting to catch on when a Russian spammer warned Reshef to stop. He refused, even though he suspected that the spammer had ties to organized crime. The Russian launched a distributed denial-of-service attack against Blue Security's Web site and its service provider. Reshef didn't waver. He spammed the Russian while fending off intensifying attacks.

One day, Reshef went with a colleague to see a friend, Nadav Aleh, who at the time worked for Unit 8200, Israel's equivalent to the N.S.A. Aleh recalled Reshef's visit: "When they came into my office, they were pale." Reshef told Aleh about some alarming e-mail correspondence from the Russian, which included, as an attachment, a recent photograph showing a Blue Security executive's children playing outside, in Tel Aviv. Reshef soon shut down Blue Security.

Reshef declined to comment on the incident. But Aleh told me, "If you think about hacking back from a military perspective, it's like going into battle with little intelligence. Your weapon sets won't fit the target set. These are not good odds to win."

Blue Security may offer a cautionary tale, but, if Graves's bill passes, it is reasonable to imagine that some companies could, with limited goals, engage in hacking back and achieve some success, such as the recovery of stolen data.

MOSES, NEW YORK

There was a boat on the pond
but no water. The water had sacrificed

itself for your brutal thirst. Goodbye,
cowboys. Goodbye, not knowing

to speak.

The boat is ready for me, baby.
Enough with the reeds and the motherless.

One singular horn
will turn your face purple.

A leaf blower may take your breath away.

But the boat here is always
and human. It floats on nothing.

All the surfaces for floating
and reflecting are gone. What good is

what passes through us but clouds?

There is a branch overhead
as if there were birds. And I would rather

show you than go.

—*Elizabeth Metzger*

(That is, if the information hasn't already been copied, something that is nearly impossible to know.) Bret Padres, a former Air Force computer-crime investigator who is now the C.E.O. of the Crypsis Group, a cyberforensics firm, told me about some work he had done for a defense contractor whose server had been breached. He examined malicious code that the hackers had left behind, and found that it contained the I.P. address of the hackers' hop point, along with their sign-in credentials. Soon after Padres shared this information with the client, a member of the company's I.T. team hacked into the hop point and grabbed all the data. How did the contractor's lawyers justify the raid? "They weren't asked," Padres said.

Should hacking back become legal, it may well help individual victims of cybercrime, but it is unlikely to make the Internet a safer place. If gun ownership is any indicator, more weapons tend to create more violence, and cyberweapons may be even harder to regulate than guns. In 2012, the United States and Russia were on the verge of signing a cyberweapons treaty, but failed to reach an agreement. Open-source hacking code is widely available for sale online, ostensibly to help companies perform penetration tests, but the code can just as easily be used for illicit purposes. According to a former N.S.A. official, the Iranian hackers who attacked the banks used open-source code.

Some cybersecurity companies are preparing to capitalize on a more permissive legal environment. Gadi Evron, the C.E.O. of Cymmetria, the honeypot developer, said, "Things seem to be changing." Evron started Cymmetria, which is based in Israel, four years ago. After launching a honeypot platform, he began selling a "legal hackback" add-on, MazeHunter. Once an intruder enters a Cymmetria honeypot, a client can monitor the attacker and gather information on it, or it can activate MazeHunter. If an intruder "is on your network, you can do whatever you want" to it, Evron said. Recently, he told me, a client detected a hacker inside its system, gathered forensic information on the intruder, and then, using MazeHunter, severed his connection to the server.

If Cymmetria could do whatever it wanted against an attacker, as long as the attacker was inside the victim's network, could MazeHunter be used by U.S. companies to sabotage the attacker's computer? "That would be illegal," Evron replied, without answering the question. I raised the matter with Jim Christy, a vice-president at Cymmetria. He said that the company merely provided clients with tools, and added, "It's up to the *client* to decide how to use them." He went on, "Anything the bad guys can do, the client can do. Not legally. There's a difference between 'can' and 'may.'" In essence, he said, "Cymmetria has built a Q-tip. If you read the back of a box of Q-tips, you're not supposed to use them to clean your ears. But everybody does it."

Even those who support the reforms of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act recognize that an "everybody does it" ethic poses certain hazards. In 2010, just as maritime firms were beginning to staff their vessels with armed guards, one unit opened fire on a boat of Somali pirates, killing at least one of them. Hoffman and Levite, the Carnegie researchers who wrote about Somali piracy, acknowledge the instability of frontier economies, but note that standards and practices can improve to minimize risks "to an acceptable level."

What is an acceptable level of risk in cyberspace? In November, 2017, Keith Alexander, the former N.S.A. director, told a group of journalists, "You can't have companies starting a war." Graves's bill may be well-intentioned, but, if it passes, an American company will inevitably do the cyber equivalent of firing the first shot. If the target is powerful, the consequences could be disastrous. Ledgett, the former N.S.A. deputy director, told me that legalizing hacking back in the private sector would be "an epically stupid idea."

One afternoon in February, I went to see Shawn Carpenter at his office, in Rosslyn, Virginia. Since receiving his settlement, Carpenter has invested in numerous tech startups, but he hasn't given up his passion for cybersecurity.

Carpenter no longer works for iSIGHT. Reflecting on the time when he ran honeypots out of his home in Albuquerque, he said, "I'm a lot more measured now." He cited, as an example, some work that had been done at iSIGHT, when the company was trying to figure out how to penetrate a hacking collective. In his Sandia days, he said, he might have hacked members of the collective in order to gather intelligence on it; that would have been the easiest route. But at iSIGHT he went to great lengths to comply with the law. His colleagues spent sixteen months cultivating sources inside the collective, persuading them, slyly, to relocate their operations from a secure server to one that iSIGHT had legitimate access to, through the consent of its owner. Carpenter recalled, "Boom! Just like that, we could see every plan—everything that they were doing. We had better intel than the F.B.I. and the N.S.A. on them. We knew this because we were briefing those people!"

Carpenter wasn't sure how he felt about Graves's campaign to lift some of the restrictions on hacking back. In his view, he said, "the only people who should do this are the people who are competent *and* who work with law enforcement." His investigation of the Chinese hackers proved that private citizens could identify digital thieves, and that their findings could be conveyed to the proper legal authorities. At the same time, the adventure cost him his job, and he had been forced to spend nearly two years preparing for his trial. Moreover, from a technical perspective, what he'd done was by no means foolproof.

"There's a lot of luck involved," he said. "Because you don't know what other operations may be going on." A private citizen, he noted, could accidentally get in the way of secret N.S.A. operations, or an F.B.I. investigation, crashing important servers and deleting evidence that could be useful in a prosecution.

In January, James Bourie, the former Special Forces officer, left the Nisos Group to start another firm, BlueLight. "I'm kind of conflicted about it all," he said of hacking back. "I trust *myself*, and I trust my sense of right and wrong. But I don't trust other people, and I wouldn't want them running around doing this stuff. There just aren't many out there with the tools and responsibility to do this well." ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE *SPY* WHO CAME HOME

Why an expert in counterterrorism became a beat cop.

BY BEN TAUB

Shortly after an evening nap, Patrick Skinner drove to the police station in the Third Precinct in Savannah, Georgia, wearing ill-fitting body armor. It was late December, and bitterly cold, and he figured that the weather would bring fewer shootings than usual but more cases of domestic abuse. "Summertime is the murder time," he said. He had come to work early to tape together his body camera, because the clasp was broken.

The shift supervisor—a tall corporal with a slight paunch—stood at a lectern. "Good mornin', mornin', mornin'," he said. It was 10:31 P.M. Speaking through a wad of tobacco, he delivered a briefing on criminal activities from earlier in the day, then listed vehicles that had been reported stolen. "Look out for a cooter-colored truck," he said.

The walls of the briefing room were sparsely decorated. There was a map of each beat within the precinct—an area, more than half the size of Manhattan, that includes Savannah's most violent neighborhoods—along with a display case of various drug samples and a whiteboard listing police cars that were out of commission. One had overheated, two had been wrecked in accidents, and two others had broken headlights. A sixth car was labelled "unsafe for road."

"What does 'unsafe for road' mean?" a cop asked.

"That's all our cars," another said.

Most patrol officers drive old Ford Crown Victorias, several of which are approaching two hundred thousand miles on the odometer—"and those are cop miles, where we're flooring it at least twice an hour," Skinner told me. Officers complain about worn tires, dodgy brakes, and holes in the seats where guns and batons have rubbed impressions into the fabric. Many cars run twenty-four hours a day.

Skinner, who is forty-seven, is short and bald, with a trim beard, Arctic-blue eyes, and a magnetic social energy that has the effect of putting people around him at ease. He wears humor and extroversion as a kind of shield; most of his colleagues know almost nothing about his life leading up to the moment they met.

At around 3 A.M., a call came in: a "strange vehicle" was idling in someone's driveway, in the Summerside neighborhood. The caller gave no address and no description of the car.

Though Skinner had completed his training just two months earlier, he already knew every road in the Third Precinct. On slow nights, he tried to memorize the locations of Savannah's traffic lights and stop signs, so that he could visualize the quickest route to any call. Darren Bradley, who went through training with Skinner, said, "When they gave us the sheets with police signals and codes"—a list of nearly two hundred radio call signs—"he looked it over once and had it in his head."

As Skinner approached Summerside, a white Camaro with tinted windows pulled out and came toward him. Cars registered in Georgia don't have license plates on the front, but, as the Camaro zoomed past, Skinner glanced into his side mirror, memorized the rear-plate number from its backward reflection, and called it in.

Skinner sped north, picturing the Camaro's likely escape route, and how to cut the driver off. "If he's an idiot, he'll turn right on Fifty-second Street and end up behind me at the next light," Skinner said. Two minutes later, the Camaro rounded a bend and pulled up behind Skinner. He smiled.

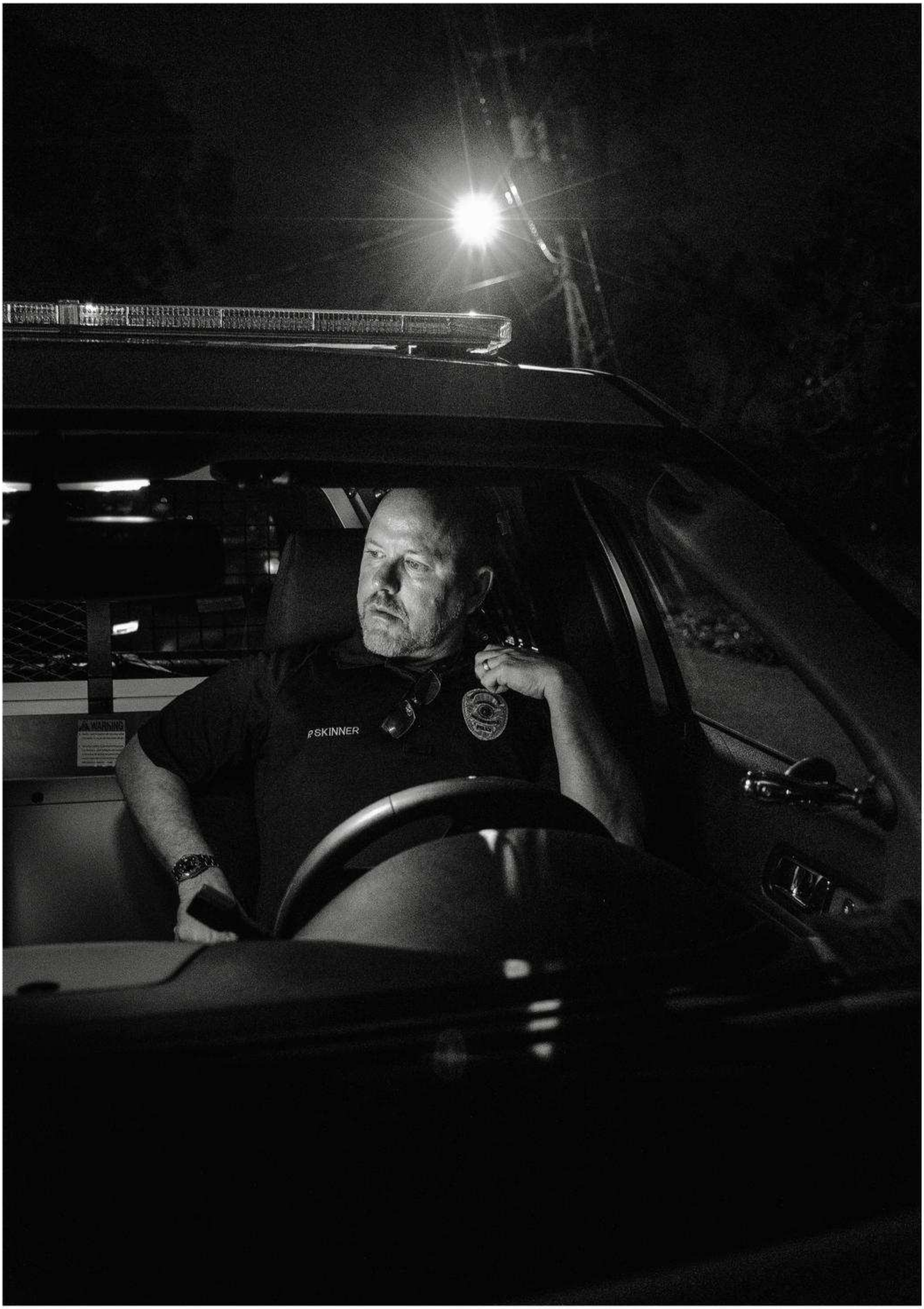
In Savannah, several cars are stolen every day—often for use in other crimes. The Camaro driver made some evasive maneuvers, but, to Skinner, this behavior did not qualify as probable cause for a traffic stop. When the dispatcher ran a check on the license plate, it came back clean. Skinner continued on his patrol.

Georgia's law-enforcement-training program does not teach recruits to memorize license plates backward in mirrors. Like many of Skinner's abilities, that skill was honed in the C.I.A. He joined the agency during the early days of America's war on terror, one of the darkest periods in its history, and spent almost a decade running assets in Afghanistan, Jordan, and Iraq. He shook hands with lawmakers, C.I.A. directors, the King of Jordan, the Emir of Qatar, the Prime Minister of Singapore, and Presidents of Afghanistan and the United States. "I became the Forrest Gump of counterterrorism and law enforcement," he said, stumbling in and out of the margins of history. But over the years he came to believe that counterterrorism was creating more problems than it solved, fuelling illiberalism and hysteria, destroying communities overseas, and diverting attention and resources from essential problems in the United States.

Meanwhile, American police forces were adopting some of the militarized tactics that Skinner had seen give rise to insurgencies abroad. "We have to stop treating people like we're in Fallujah," he told me. "It doesn't work. Just look what happened in Fallujah." In time, he came to believe that the most meaningful application of his training and expertise—the only way to exemplify his beliefs about American security, at home and abroad—was to become a community police officer in Savannah, where he grew up.

"We write these strategic white papers, saying things like 'Get the local

"We have to stop treating people like we're in Fallujah," Patrick Skinner said. "Just look what happened in Fallujah."



PHOTOGRAPH BY JONNO RATTMAN

Sunni population on our side,'" Skinner said. "Cool. Got it. But, then, if I say, 'Get the people who live at Thirty-eighth and Bulloch on our side,' you realize, man, that's fucking hard—and it's just a city block. It sounds so stupid when you apply the rhetoric over here. Who's the leader of the white community in Live Oak neighborhood? Or the poor community?" Skinner shook his head. "'Leader of the Iraqi community.' What the fuck does that mean?"

No military force can end terrorism, just as firefighters can't end fire and cops can't end crime. But there are ways to build a resilient society. "It can't be on a government contract that says 'In six months, show us these results,'" Skinner said. "It has to be 'I live here. This is my job forever.'" He compared his situation to that of Voltaire's Candide, who, after enduring a litany of absurd horrors in a society plagued by fanaticism and incompetence, concludes that the only truly worthwhile activity is tending his garden. "Except my garden is the Third Precinct," Skinner said.

"I've never been a senior anything," Skinner said. "Always a rookie." In 1991, when he was nineteen, he joined the Coast Guard; he spent two years carrying out search-and-rescue operations, followed by three years working on an icebreaker in the Hudson River.

He met his wife, Theresa, in the Coast Guard, and in 1999 she was assigned to a position at headquarters, in Washington, D.C. Skinner, who had spent the past couple of years working as a waiter and a flight attendant while finishing his college degree, joined the Capitol Police, but his graduation ceremony was interrupted by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Before the debris settled, Skinner had faxed an application to the C.I.A. In the following weeks, the agency received more than a hundred thousand applications; it took months to sift through the pile.

The Capitol Police temporarily assigned Skinner to plainclothes duty in the Senate. On January 29, 2002, he accompanied Mayor Michael Bloomberg to President George W. Bush's first State of the Union address. They sat together as Bush spoke of an "axis of evil" made up of rogue states "and their terrorist allies," setting the stage for the invasion of Iraq.

Later that year, Skinner left the Capitol Police and became an air marshal. One day, he got a call from a blocked number. "You applied to work for the government?" the caller asked.

"I already work for the government," Skinner replied.

"Yeah, but I mean the *government*."

The caller was a recruiter for the C.I.A. "He asked me some rapid-fire questions—'Is the Indus River north or south of Kashmir?' 'What was the date of Partition?' 'Name five towns in the occupied West Bank'—basically to cross me off his list," Skinner said. "But I knew all the answers, because I had sat on airplanes for the past six months, doing nothing but reading newspapers and *The Economist*."

In the summer of 2003, Skinner joined the C.I.A.'s third post-9/11 class, as a prospective case officer, working under diplomatic cover. He refuses to discuss the training program—the agency doesn't officially acknowledge its existence—but much of it can be pieced together from memoirs by former spies.

Training begins at the C.I.A. headquarters, in Langley, Virginia, where aspiring case officers develop cover identities to facilitate clandestine work abroad. After a few months, they are sent to the Farm—a sprawling, wooded campus in southeastern Virginia. There, for about nine months, the students inhabit an increasingly complex role-playing scenario, in which the Farm is a fictitious unfriendly country and the instructors serve as teachers, tacticians, sources, border guards, and officers of a hostile intelligence agency. Case officers rarely steal secrets themselves; instead, they recruit well-placed foreigners to pass along information.

Students practice their recruitment skills at fake embassy parties. Each is assigned a target from the host country, and is tasked with carrying out conversations that play to the target's interests and hobbies; by the end of the evening, students are expected to have elicited their assets' contact details, which are used to begin a delicate, months-long process of recruitment. The next day, they receive feedback on their approach. They lose points for tells as minor as drinking beer from a bottle; diplomats typically use a glass.

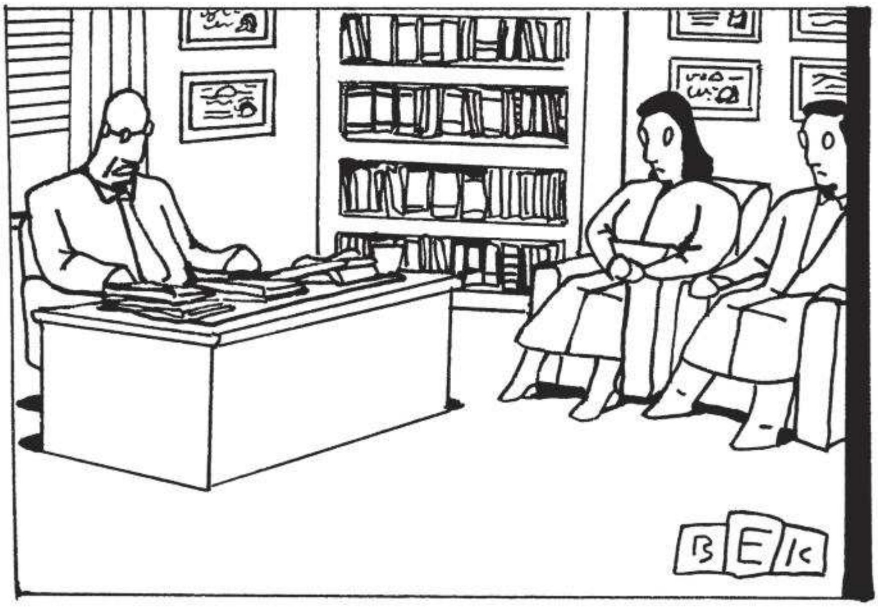
Students are trained in tactical skills that they hope they'll never need. During the driving course, known as "crash and burn," they learn how to avoid obstacles at high speeds, how to behave at checkpoints, and how to smash through barricades. They practice navigation and hand-to-hand combat, and spend days hiding in the mud while being hunted by armed instructors. They are taught to jump out of airplanes and to handle explosives, foreign weapons, and the gadgetry of secret communications.

They also spend hundreds of hours outside the campus, skulking through suburban Virginia and Maryland, crafting surveillance-detection routes, on foot and in rental cars. Each student scopes out sites at which to meet with the asset from the embassy party, then devises ninety-minute paths to the locations, through congested areas and isolated roads, with regular stops at gas stations and shops, in order to obscure the real objective, which is to draw a surveillance team into view. Every year, the agency wrecks several rental cars; students spend so much time staring at their mirrors that they sometimes lose sight of what's in front of them.

The C.I.A.'s fixation on area familiarization has shaped Skinner's approach to policing. He begins each shift by driving the perimeter of his beat, then working his way inward, sometimes heading the wrong direction down one-way streets to insure that he does not fall into familiar patterns. On slow nights, he parks at the scenes of unsolved robberies that took place weeks earlier and imagines which escape route the thief would have taken, so that next time he can go straight to wherever the thief is headed.

In the Third Precinct, many establishments that stay open past midnight are robbed at gunpoint several times a year. "People thank cops for their service, but they should be thanking McDonald's workers," Skinner told me. "They're way more likely to have a gun in their face than I am." He added, "The only place that doesn't really get hit is the late-night liquor store. People are thinking, If this place gets shut down, how will we get in drunken fights?"

One night, Skinner and I arrived at



"Legally, I have the right to talk as slowly and boringly about all your options as I want."

the site of a mystifying car wreck near Candler Hospital, on the southern edge of the precinct. Someone, while driving out of a parking lot, had launched a Ford Taurus more than twenty feet up a grassy knoll and into the hospital's sign. The front seat was covered in blood, but there was no one around. In the back, Skinner found diapers, an empty bottle of the opiate hydrocodone, an extra set of license plates, and a driver's license showing a thin white man in his late twenties, with dishevelled brown hair.

"He didn't have to walk far," an officer quipped. The emergency-room entrance was at the other end of the lot.

"Already checked. He's not there," Bradley McClellan, a young patrol officer, said.

Candler Hospital is on a busy highway, surrounded by strip malls and residential streets. Skinner narrowed his search to three likely spots, based on the cold weather and the apparent extent of the driver's injuries. He drove two blocks to a McDonald's, and the Walgreens next door, and told employees to look out for "Shaggy, from 'Scooby-Doo,' but drunk and bleeding." Skinner explained, "He's not embarrassed that he's a poor driver—he's running from a D.U.I." By sobering up before turning himself in, the man could avoid alcohol-related charges.

Skinner's third hunch was that the man had gone north on Habersham Street—heading back toward town, to be picked up by a friend. At 2:41 A.M., medical personnel at Candler called the police; Shaggy had been picked up, drunk and bleeding, at a gas station on Habersham, and was now in the E.R., shouting expletives and trying to attack the medical staff. A doctor suspected that he had broken his back, and had him involuntarily committed and strapped to a board. After his blood was taken, the cops just needed a warrant for the sample to prove the D.U.I. in court.

In the summer of 2004, Skinner completed his C.I.A. training and was deployed to Kandahar, an Afghan city near the border with Pakistan, where the agency was operating out of the former home of Mullah Omar, the one-eyed leader of the Afghan Taliban. Kabul had fallen three years earlier, but Al Qaeda's leadership had found refuge in the mountainous border areas, and Pakistani intelligence was quietly supporting the Taliban. C.I.A. officers, confined to Afghanistan, struggled to recruit assets who could penetrate jihadi networks in Pakistan's lawless tribal areas. Access was not the C.I.A.'s only obstacle; elsewhere in Afghanistan, the agency was using National Geographic maps from the nineteen-sixties, with names for landmarks and villages that didn't correspond to those used by the locals.

People in Kandahar often sought Skinner out, hoping to trade secrets for cash. "We were temporary-duty officers, and they knew our rotations," he told me. "They'd have a story of how, in Quetta"—just across the Pakistani border—"they had seen bin Laden, Zawahiri, Captain Marvel—all these people. And if you just got there you're, like, 'Holy fucking shit, I'm the best case officer in American history!' And you give them five hundred bucks and write it up for Langley." By the end of his rotation, Skinner had heard the same discredited stories dozens of times.

Douglas Laux, a case officer from Indiana, had studied Pashto, the language spoken in southern Afghanistan, before deploying to Kandahar, in 2010. When several walk-ins gave him the name of the same Taliban fighter, he asked one of them how everyone had suddenly learned it. "He informed me that the local Afghan radio stations in the area regularly broadcast the names of individuals the U.S. military wanted information about," Laux writes in his memoir, "Left of Boom," which was heavily redacted by the C.I.A. The military knew this but had neglected to inform the agency, and walk-ins had been cashing in for years.

Espionage hinges on human relationships. "The best assets I ever ran weren't in it for money," Skinner said. "They had this urge to be part of something bigger. It wasn't patriotism—they just wanted to be part of a high-functioning team." But most assets could be trusted only in a very narrow context, and locals routinely sought American firepower to back them in personal or tribal disputes. "They might tell you it's to help their country—they know we love to hear that—when it's actually revenge," Skinner said.

In Afghanistan, the U.S. military was trying to defeat the Taliban and install a new government, while the C.I.A. was primarily focussed on killing members of Al Qaeda. At times, Special Operations Forces and intelligence officers



"I ran out of ice."

• •

coördinated on highly effective raids. But tactical successes are meaningless without a strategy, and it wore on Skinner and other C.I.A. personnel that they could rarely explain how storming Afghan villages made American civilians safer.

They also never understood why the United States leadership apparently believed that the American presence would fix Afghanistan. "We were trying to do nation-building with less information than I get now at police roll call," Skinner said. Two months into the U.S. invasion, Donald Rumsfeld, the Defense Secretary, revealed in a memo that he didn't know what languages were spoken in Afghanistan. Each raid broke the country a little more than the previous one. "So we would try harder, which would make it worse," Skinner said. "And so we'd try even harder, which would make it even worse."

The assessments of field operatives carried little weight with officials in Washington. "They were telling us, 'Too many people have died here for us just to leave,'" Skinner recalled. "'But we don't want to give the Taliban a timeline.' So, forever? Is that what you're going for? They fucking live there, dude."

Skinner spent a year in Afghanistan, often under fire from Taliban positions, and returned several times in the next decade. He kept a note pinned to his ballistic vest that read "Tell my wife it was pointless."

The preferred weapon of the Taliban—and of most insurgencies, worldwide—is the Kalashnikov, a Soviet-developed assault rifle that can penetrate a person's torso from more than half a mile away. Last year, Bradley McClellan confiscated a Kalashnikov and several pistols from two juvenile pot dealers in Savannah. Although police-issue bulletproof vests can stop rounds fired from a handgun, they are useless against assault rifles. "After seeing what little kids can get their hands on, I went out and bought hard plates," designed for use in war zones, McClellan told me. The plates cost him more than five hundred dollars—a week's salary.

The prevalence of high-powered weapons in America is creating an arms race between citizens and the authorities. Each year, dozens of cops are shot dead, and officers kill around a thousand members of the public—often after mistaking innocuous objects for weapons or frightened behavior for threats. Meanwhile, peaceful protesters are increasingly confronted with snipers, armored vehicles, and smoke and tear gas. In the past twenty years, more than five billion dollars' worth of military gear has been transferred from the military to state and local police departments, including night-vision equipment, boats, aircraft, grenade launchers, and bayonets. "If we wanted an MRAP"—a military vehicle, designed to protect soldiers from ambushes and mines—"we would just have to submit an application to the federal government," Skinner told me.

According to David M. Kennedy, one of the nation's leading criminologists, American policing is practiced more as a craft than as a profession. "The kind of thinking that should go into framing and refining what a profession of public safety should be has still not been done," he told me. Officers are deployed as enforcers of the state, without being taught psychology, anthropology, sociology, community dynamics, local history, or criminology. Lethal force is prioritized above other options. When Skinner joined the police force, everyone in his class was given a pistol, but none were given Tasers, because the department had run out.

At Georgia's state police-training facilities, the focus is "all tactics and law," Skinner told me. Officers are taught that "once you give a lawful order it has to be followed—and that means immediately." But the recipient of a "lawful order" may not understand why it's being issued, or that his or her failure to comply may lead to the use of force. There's no training on how to de-escalate tense scenarios in which no crime has been committed, even though the majority of police calls fall into that category. It is up to the officer's discretion to shape these interactions, and the most straightforward option is to order belligerent people to the ground and, if they resist, tackle them and put them in cuffs.

"This is how situations go so, so badly—yet justifiably, legally," Skinner said. Police officers often encounter people during the worst moments of their lives, and Skinner believes that his role is partly to resolve trouble and

partly to prevent people from crossing the line from what he calls "near-crime" into "actual crime." The goal, he said, is "to slow things down, using the power of human interaction more than the power of the state."

"The de-escalation calls are so much more draining for me than grabbing people," he told me. "My head is humming during the call. It's exactly—and I mean *exactly*—like the prep work I used to do for the agency, where you're seeing the interaction unfold in the way that you steer it." As a case officer, Skinner drew flowcharts, mapping out every direction he thought a conversation might go. Now, he said, "instead of having a week to prepare for the meeting, I have as much time as it takes to drive up to the call."

Skinner always drives with the windows down: he tries to maximize the number of encounters people have with the police in which they feel neither scrutinized nor under suspicion. "You sometimes hear cops talk about people in the community as 'civilians,' but that's bullshit," he said. "We're not the military. The people we're policing are our neighbors. This is not semantics—if you say it enough, it becomes a mind-set." On days off, he stays at home, tending his garden and his pets and soaking in his iron bathtub, with an iPad propped against the faucet, watching standup-comedy routines and studying how facial expressions and vocal tones can defuse tension. "Little frown here or little shrug there makes a huge difference," he recently posted to Twitter, along with a clip of Ricky Gervais delivering morbid jokes about orphans and cancer.

During several searches and a house raid, I noticed that Skinner was the only officer who kept his gun holstered. One night, at 4 A.M., an alarm was triggered at his mother's former high school; officers found an open door. Three of them stalked the premises with their pistols drawn. Skinner used his flashlight. He told me that, because they were all looking in different directions, having guns drawn only increased the likelihood that they would accidentally shoot one another.

And then there are the calls where the violence has already taken place: a murder outside a gas station, a gang shoot-out with multiple casualties, a domestic-abuse case in which a man beat his girlfriend unconscious after she told him that he needed to help with the bills. We visited the woman in the hospital, where a nurse stood by as Skinner took a police report. The bones in her face were broken, and the left side was so swollen that it looked as if there were half a grapefruit under her skin. She could hardly speak, except to say "yes," "no," and, even more quietly, "I feel like it's probably my fault" and "I'm pregnant."

The following night, there was a lull in calls. As we drove through quiet streets, Skinner noted the eerie beauty of Savannah's twisted oak trees, draped in Spanish moss and cloaked in fog. Then he noted the date, and went silent. It was December 30th—the eighth anniversary of the worst day of his life, the second-deadliest day in C.I.A. history.

After 9/11, the Bush Administration authorized the C.I.A. to use an array of abusive techniques, referred to as "enhanced interrogation," on suspected Al Qaeda militants. Employees of the agency also kidnapped suspects and took them to third countries, where interrogations were outsourced to foreign intelligence services with abysmal human-rights records. That way, the C.I.A. could claim to have no knowledge of specific allegations of torture.

Jordan's General Intelligence Directorate is America's closest counterterrorism partner in the Middle East. The



U.S. funds and equips its operations, and the C.I.A. shares a counterterrorism center with the G.I.D., on the outskirts of the capital, Amman. According to Human Rights Watch, between 2001 and 2004 the C.I.A. transported at least fourteen terror suspects—often wearing only diapers and blindfolds—to a G.I.D. detention facility, where some of them were tortured until they confessed to crimes. A Yemeni detainee named Ali al-Sharqawi kept a secret diary. "Every time that the interrogator asks me about a certain piece of information, and I talk, he asks me if I told this to the Americans," Sharqawi wrote. "And if I say no he jumps for joy, and he leaves me and goes to report it to his superiors, and they rejoice."

In 2006, after another deployment in Afghanistan, Skinner was assigned to work at the C.I.A. station in Amman. He was relieved to be moving with his wife to a posting in a peaceful country. The agency's use of black sites, rendition, and torture had become the subject of intense public scrutiny, and the enhanced-interrogation program, which relied heavily on contractors, had been scrapped. According to the C.I.A.'s inspector general, the torture sessions had extracted no actionable intelligence.

Skinner, like most case officers, got results through "rapport-based elicitation." "You can build great relationships with some unsavory people," he said. "In any terrorist group, there's dysfunction, usually some jealousy. It's literally a job—they get a salary. So you're looking for the guy who feels underappreciated, the guy who's getting dicked on expenses."

In late 2008, the National Security Agency traced a prominent jihadi blogger to a desktop computer in a working-class neighborhood of Amman. The blogger posted grisly footage of American soldiers dying in Iraq, and he interpreted the words of bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, as if he had inside knowledge. "The speculation among his most ardent online followers was that he was a Saudi and very likely a senior official within Al Qaeda," Joby Warrick writes in "The Triple Agent," his meticulous account of the case. The C.I.A. shared the blogger's address with the G.I.D., and the case was taken up by one of Skinner's close associates, a thirty-four-year-old Jordanian captain named Sharif Ali bin Zeid.

The man behind the computer—a young doctor from Jordan named Humam Khalil al-Balawi—seemed like an improbable fanatic. He spent his days treating women and children in a Palestinian refugee camp, and his evenings with his wife and daughters. He was a pious, mild-mannered introvert, with no apparent real-world jihadi connections,

yet online he wrote as if he were plotting a suicide attack.

One night in January, 2009, the G.I.D. raided Balawi's home and brought him in for interrogation. When they released him, three days later, "he was almost unrecognizable," Warrick writes. "Jittery, sullen, distracted." In the following weeks, bin Zeid took Balawi out for coffee and expensive meals. He thought that Balawi seemed malleable and weak, and that his online status within jihadi circles could be used in counterterrorism operations. If his help led to the capture or the death of high-level Al Qaeda members, bin Zeid told him, the reward would be staggering: the Americans were offering twenty-five million dollars for information that led them to Zawahiri.



In February, Balawi proposed to bin Zeid that he go to Pakistan's tribal areas, make contact with members of the Pakistani Taliban, and ask for their help in setting up medical clinics. This cover would allow him to move freely within Taliban territory, and to send bin Zeid intelligence reports.

Bin Zeid brought Balawi's plan to Skinner, and their agencies discussed it at length. Balawi had jihadi credibility, but he had no training in codes or tradecraft, and the agencies agreed that he would probably be found out and killed. Nevertheless, should the young doctor somehow pass along actionable intelligence against Al Qaeda, the C.I.A. would have drones ready to strike. In recent years, the agency's vocabulary had shifted: a "target" was no longer someone to be recruited; it was somebody to be tracked, kidnapped, rendered, or killed.

On March 18th, Balawi left Amman. Two months later, he e-mailed bin Zeid that the Taliban had accepted him, and that he would serve as a personal physician to its leadership. In June, the C.I.A. assigned Skinner to a posting at the American Embassy in Baghdad, and Balawi's file was transferred to his colleague and friend Darren LaBonte.

In late August, after months of silence, Balawi sent an encrypted video file that showed him in a room with one of bin Laden's closest associates. Intelligence analysts were stunned. "You have lifted our heads in front of the Americans," bin Zeid wrote to Balawi. It was the first time that the C.I.A. had ever penetrated Al Qaeda. Soon afterward, Balawi sent bin Zeid an e-mail saying that Zawahiri had sought him out to treat his diabetes. Bin Laden had been in hiding for so long that the C.I.A. believed that Zawahiri and Al Qaeda's head of finance, Sheikh Saeed al-Masri, were actually running the group. But there had been no confirmed sightings of Zawahiri since 2002. The C.I.A. director, Leon Panetta, briefed President Obama on Balawi's access, and the agency decided to try to debrief Balawi in person, at the C.I.A. annex at a U.S. base in Khost, Afghanistan.

In early December, LaBonte and bin Zeid left for Khost, where they met with Jennifer Matthews, a twenty-year agency veteran, and eleven other C.I.A. officers and security contractors. LaBonte preferred one-on-one debriefings, often in the back of a moving car, but Matthews and her bosses in Langley had decided to give Balawi a full welcoming committee. Since the meeting would take place a few days after Balawi's birthday, Matthews instructed the base chef to bake a cake. The base was guarded by Afghan forces, but, fearing that they might report Balawi's presence to the Taliban, Matthews ordered them to leave their posts.

Before the meeting, LaBonte was exchanging messages with Skinner, in Baghdad. LaBonte was upset with the C.I.A.'s disregard for its usual methods. He had argued with Matthews, and had sent a cable to the Amman station, but was rebuffed. A Jordanian intelligence officer warned the C.I.A. that bin Zeid had become too attached to his asset to make dispassionate assessments, but he, too, was ignored. The President had been told that the meeting was about to happen; no one wanted to hear that it shouldn't.

As Balawi's car approached the base, LaBonte told Skinner that he had to go. "Enjoy your meeting, Fuckface," Skinner wrote back.

The car weaved through three unmanned barriers and approached the C.I.A. annex, where Matthews, LaBonte, and the others were waiting outside with Balawi's cake. Balawi had some difficulty climbing out of the car. He started limping toward the greeting party, muttering a prayer, and then reached for a detonator attached to his wrist. There was enough time for everyone to understand what was about to happen, but not enough time for anyone to run away.

The explosion killed the driver, bin Zeid, and seven C.I.A. officers and contractors, including LaBonte and Matthews. In martyrdom videos that were released after the attack, Balawi explained that Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives had worked with him to pass along exclusive and accurate information, in order to win the C.I.A.'s trust.

The agency, in its desire to kill Al Qaeda targets, had overlooked a fundamental rule of espionage: that an ideologue can't be turned, "even if he is offered the sun in one hand and the moon in the other," as Balawi said in one of the videos. Coercion can work, but it also inspires revenge. Months later, an internal C.I.A. investigation described the attack as the result of "systemic failure" within the agency.

"We were chasing down this irresistible bait—this guy had actual, no-joke access to Zawahiri, the most wanted person on the fucking planet—and we fell for it because his intel was real," Skinner told me. He added, "Those of us who make it out of these places—we're not better, we're luckier."

In Baghdad, Skinner was mired in politics and violence. It had been six years since the American invasion and subsequent dismantling of the Iraqi Army had led to a full-blown insurgency. Skinner had spent many evenings in Amman drinking Johnnie Walker Black with Iraqi tribal sheikhs, trying to recruit their support. "These guys had fled the war and stolen all the Iraqi money," he told me. "We would try to develop them as assets for what became 'the surge.'" In 2007, Bush sent an additional twenty thousand troops to Iraq to quell the insurgency, but, two

years later, car bombs were killing hundreds of civilians in Baghdad each month. The Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, a Shiite, was stacking the security forces with loyalists who carried out sectarian massacres. "We were focussed on Al Qaeda," Skinner said. "He was focussed on Sunnis."

Skinner felt isolated and alone. Theresa had stayed in Amman, and on Skinner's next leave they rented a beach house on Tybee Island, outside Savannah. It was a welcome break, but not without stress. "Even when you're on vacation, you still have people who are putting their lives at risk to get information for you," Skinner told me. "If you fuck up, they're dead. Everybody had assets who were killed."

In June, 2010, Skinner completed his posting in Iraq. He and Theresa bought a house with a small garden in Savannah, near where he'd grown up. They moved in, and adopted a stray dog named Pork Chop. Skinner's parents and one of his sisters had left Savannah years earlier, but he gradually persuaded them to move back. "It was my last act of recruitment—getting everyone in my family to come home," he said.

Skinner took an extended leave of absence from the C.I.A., and then resigned. In 2011, he joined the Soufan Group, a private-sector intelligence-analysis firm that employs retired American and British security officials and spies. As the director of special projects, he advised governments and corporations on matters of geopolitics and risk, and offered public analysis in the form of unsigned "intel-briefs," congressional testimony, and interviews with journalists. In 2014, when the Senate Intelligence Committee released its findings on the C.I.A.'s use of "enhanced interrogation," Skinner wrote an op-ed for *Time*, describing torture as an "indefensible tactic" that is designed "to produce false confessions for propaganda purposes."

That year, ISIS captured the Iraqi city of Mosul and beheaded aid workers and journalists on camera. As the United States became consumed with fear of the group, Skinner grew uneasy in his role. He fielded phone calls from reporters who seemed more interested in citing a former C.I.A. officer than in what he had to say. "One journalist called me up and said, 'My deadline is in ten minutes, but ISIS is bad, right?'" Skinner recalled.

In March, 2016, while visiting his aunt in Grand Rapids, Michigan, he gave a lecture on terrorism at the local World Affairs Council. "We have become the most fragile superpower ever," he told the audience. While Al Qaeda aims to carry out what its operatives call "spectacular attacks," he explained, ISIS obsesses over creating a "spectacular reaction." As an example, he recounted an incident in Garland, Texas, in which two wannabe jihadis were killed after attempting a raid on a provocative anti-Muslim convention. The men had no coherent affiliation with ISIS; they merely followed its instructions—which have been widely disseminated by the American media—to post online that they were acting on behalf of the group. "If you strip the word 'terrorism,' two idiots drove from Arizona and got shot in a parking lot," Skinner said. The real threat to American life was the response. "We shut down cities," he said. "We change our laws. We change our societies." He went on, "We're basically doing their work for them."

"Getting killed by ISIS in Savannah is like expecting to get hit by a piano falling from an asteroid," Skinner said. "It's batshit insane. Day to day, it's the people who are kicking in doors and stealing cars who are actually making life unbearable."

Skinner became increasingly consumed by the incongruity between his words and his actions. He felt like a "fraud," he said. He preached that insurgencies arose out of the failure of local policing, yet he didn't know a thing about the gangs operating a few blocks away. "We have people that are disappearing into the cracks of society," he said. And they can be helped only on an individual basis. "Then you have to scale that support to a neighborhood. And then to a city."

Because local police departments pay poorly, "the people who have been trained to do this work best are never



going to be doing it," Skinner said. According to a study by Brown University, since 2001 the average American taxpayer has contributed more than twenty-three thousand dollars to veterans' care, homeland security, and military operations in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. "I used to spend more money on meals and entertainment for a couple of sources in Amman, each year, than the Savannah Police Department has to spend on cars," Skinner told me. "And whatever the American people got out of my meals in Amman had way less impact on their lives than what was happening down the block."

In October, 2016, one of Skinner's closest friends in the C.I.A. was killed by ISIS forces in Afghanistan. Skinner was despondent. A few months later, he left the Soufan Group and joined his local police force, taking a pay cut of more than a hundred thousand dollars a year.

HAIR

In the old days
hair was magical.
If hair was cut
you had to make sure it didn't end up
in the wrong hands.

Bad people could mix it
with, say, the spit of a frog.
Or with the urine of a rat!
And certain words
might be spoken.
Then horrible things
might happen to you.

A woman with a husband
in the Navy
could not comb her hair after dark.
His ship might go down.

But good things
could happen, too.
My grandmother
threw a lock of her hair
into the fireplace.
It burned brightly.
That is why she lived
to be a hundred and one.

For the Savannah police, the biggest obstacle in gaining the community's trust is the city's history. Savannah is around fifty-five per cent black, and Georgia practiced segregation well into the second half of the twentieth century; after Skinner completed his training, he was startled to find that many interactions he had with older black men began with them reflexively putting up their hands.

Georgia's first black police officer was sworn in on May 3, 1947. His name is John Alliston White, and, along with eight other black officers, he joined Savannah's police force as part of what the local papers called "an experiment," overseen by a sympathetic lieutenant named Truman Ward. "The other white officers—they used to call him 'the nigger Jesus,'" White told me.

White, who is ninety-three, is the only surviving member of the original nine. I met him at his house, and we spent an afternoon poring over faded photographs, yellowed newspaper clippings, and memorabilia that filled his living-room cabinets and hung from his walls.

White attended high school in Cuyler-Brownsville, an area of Savannah that, after emancipation, was set aside for black families. In spite of Jim Crow laws, by the early twentieth century it had a thriving, educated black middle class, made up of doctors, lawyers, teachers, and, later, civil-rights advocates.

For more than a decade, White and the other black officers were not allowed to arrest white people or use the drinking fountain at the police barracks. Several of his white colleagues hazed him, and, when his shift was over, they sometimes hired a cleaner to wash the interior of the car he had used, "because they said that we were dirty," he told me. His first couple of years on the force nearly drove him to suicide. "We went through hell," he said.

According to White, in the nineteen-sixties a new chief started requiring officers to write reports. "The black officers—we were educated," White said. Some of the white officers couldn't write, and many of the more racist cops left the force. White became a detective, and when Martin Luther King, Jr., came to Savannah he served as his bodyguard. But, when people took to the streets after King's assassination, White was forced to become the "principal arresting officer for eight hundred and seven demonstrators," he recalled; his superiors thought that it would be better if white cops were not involved.

By the seventies, according to Jamal Touré, a professor at Savannah State University, many middle-class black families were moving out of Cuyler-Brownsville. With desegregation, Touré told me, "we start saying, 'Oh, we can now go into these other neighborhoods,'" leaving behind the poor and working-class people. Houses were abandoned, and, as explicitly racist laws were replaced with policies that led to the mass incarceration of black men, neighborhoods began to collapse. "The larger historical sweep of the experience of black Americans with the government of the United States and its arms of authority, like the police, is one of out-and-out white supremacy," David M. Kennedy, the criminologist, told me. "The law was used to control and abuse black communities." Cuyler-Brownsville, crippled by desperation

My uncle had red hair.
One day it started falling out.
A few days later
his infant son died.

Some women let their hair grow long.
If it fell below the knees
that meant
they would never find a husband.

Braiding hair into cornrows
was a safety measure.
It would keep hair
from falling out.

My aunt dropped a hairpin.
It meant somebody
was talking about her.

Birds gathered human hair
to build their nests.
They wove it around sticks.
And nothing happened to the birds.

They were lucky.
But people?

—*Clarence Major*

and blight, soon became consumed by gang violence.

John White retired in 1984. He told me that, throughout his career, the police force was plagued by corruption. By the early eighties, drug dealers were transporting pot and cocaine on shrimping boats from South America to the islands east of Savannah, and officers on the drug task force were taking a cut.

By the early nineties, Savannah had one of the highest murder rates in the United States. In 2013, with corruption, theft, and sexual-harassment scandals brewing in the ranks, Willie Lovett, the chief of police, abruptly retired, and was later arrested and convicted on extortion, gambling, and obstruction charges, for colluding with illegal gambling networks. He is currently in federal prison.

Lovett's replacement was Jack Lumpkin, a forty-eight-year veteran of Georgia policing, who, as a young black officer, had been forced to service white officers' cars. Lumpkin had spent more than thirty years in leadership positions, and was known throughout the state for his single-strike policy on lying. He soon fired a number of officers. Others quit on their own. "We were wondering when they were going to actually start learning that lying was a cardinal sin," Lumpkin told me, smiling. The department aggressively recruited new cops who Lumpkin believed would develop more "legitimacy with the citizens," and partnered with the National Network for Safe Communities, led by Kennedy, in an attempt to reduce neighborhood gang shootings.

According to Kennedy, neighborhood gang violence, which accounts for most of the shootings in Savannah, is driven not only by small-group dynamics, the availability of weapons, and obsessions with vendettas but also by alienation from authorities. "It's a fundamental break in the social contract," he said. "If you're in trouble, you have to take care of it yourself, because you can't ask the police for help. So that becomes another shooting." In high-crime areas, he continued, "the networks of perpetrators are essentially the same as the networks of victims."

In Savannah, neighborhoods with vastly different demographics and crime rates are often separated by only the width of a street. North of a Confederate monument in Forsyth Park, tourists walk through the historic district, lined with cafés, antique shops, and grand antebellum homes, oblivious to the poverty a few blocks away. I stayed at the Marshall House, built in 1851, which keeps a well-lit portrait of Robert E. Lee over the staircase, near a framed copy of Georgia's Ordinance of Secession. The city's historic-tour guides tend to gloss over slavery, as if it were impolite to acknowledge the violence and oppression behind the construction of everything beautiful. Just west of the old city center, the housing office in Yamacraw Village—a public-housing facility, home to many poor African-Americans—is a replica of the big house on the Hermitage Plantation.

One night last fall, someone reported a rape at the corner of Forty-fifth and Florance, in the heart of Cuyler-Brownsville. Skinner raced to the intersection, and found a young white couple sitting on the grass, buttoning their pants. They were hopelessly drunk and lost. The woman said that they had taken a taxi from a bar downtown but that it had dropped them off there instead of at her house, in the affluent Ardsley Park neighborhood. Skinner laughed. "Does this look like fucking Ardsley Park to you?" he asked.

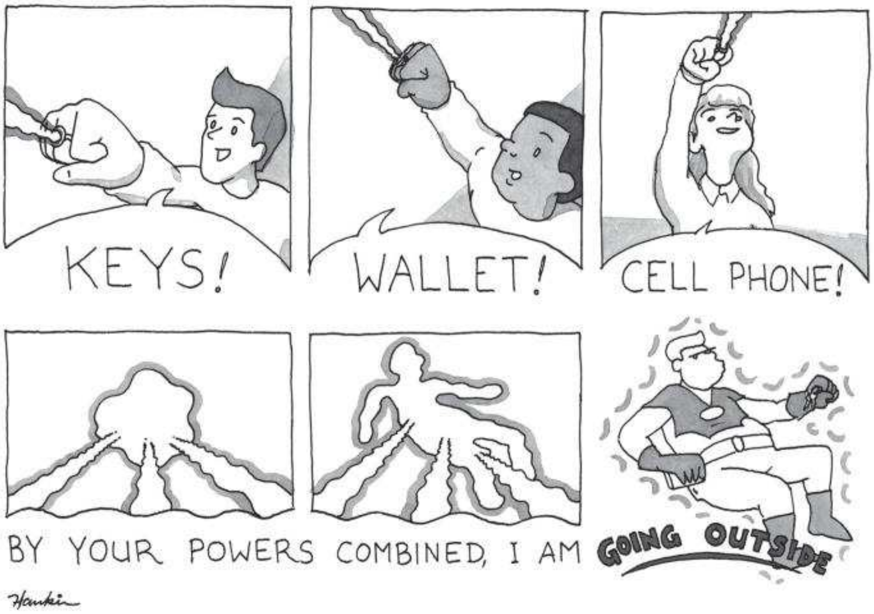
The woman lowered her voice to a whisper. "I don't want to be racist, but—"

"But you're gonna be, aren't you?"

"There are a lot of black people."

The police lights had woken people in nearby houses. Skinner called another taxi. As the couple waited on the corner, a middle-aged black woman ambled over, dressed in pajamas. "Oh, I see," she said, raising her eyebrows. "We can't walk around their neighborhood, but they can fuck in our yards."

One night in late December, at around 3:30 A.M., a few blocks south of Cuyler-Brownsville, a young black man ran into the road and urged Skinner to pull over. He said that he'd



been at the home of a girl he "hangs out with," and either she had stolen his watch or he had misplaced it—he wasn't sure. He reeked of alcohol, and couldn't remember the woman's name or address, but he gestured in the direction of the housing projects a few blocks over. Skinner asked for the man's name and date of birth, to run a quick check for outstanding warrants. "Anthony," the man said, before hesitating and adding "Greene" and a date of birth.

Skinner drove around the block. "He definitely just gave me a fake last name," he told me. "People don't usually lie about their first name." Skinner pulled over and typed "Anthony Greene" into a police database on his onboard laptop. No record. Then he tried "Anthony" and the man's date of birth, and found "Anthony Jackson," who had been charged with dozens of crimes, including lying to police officers about his identity, and jailed at least thirty times. The photograph on the screen showed the man we had just met. In a corner of the screen, there was a small notification: "Alias: Anthony Greene." Jackson was on probation, but he didn't have an outstanding warrant, and, apart from apparently lying to Skinner, he hadn't done anything wrong.

Skinner returned to the corner, and explained to Jackson that he couldn't find the watch without knowing where the woman lived. Jackson nodded and thanked him. "Listen, buddy, next time don't give me a fake name, O.K.?" Skinner said.

"I didn't!" Jackson called out. "I got an I.D." He stumbled into the road, handed Skinner his driver's license, and shouted his Social Security number.

"God damn it, he just couldn't help it," Skinner muttered. If the driver's license was fake, he'd have to arrest him. But a different database showed that the license was authentic, and that it belonged to Anthony Greene. And yet a search of the Social Security number he had given Skinner led straight back to Anthony Jackson.

"He's his own legal doppelgänger!" Skinner exclaimed. "He's two people, but neither of them is wanted—which is insane, because literally everyone in this neighborhood is wanted." After a few minutes of cross-checking databases, he walked back to the man, returned his license, and apologized.

In the next few days, Skinner kept bringing up the case. "Imagine if he had been belligerent, or there was a warrant out for one of him," he said. "We had all the time in the world. But, even with these vast databases of information, we came out of that interaction with zero knowledge. Maybe negative knowledge." He shook his head. "We've invaded countries on worse information. But, if the C.I.A. taught me one thing, it is to always be acutely aware of the tremendous amount of shit I don't know."

On New Year's Eve, locals launched fireworks out of abandoned lots, and Cuyler-Brownsville erupted in celebratory gunfire. "Good trigger pull," Skinner noted, as someone emptied what sounded like a .40-calibre pistol about thirty feet from the car. "Trigger control is half the battle."

Shots fired into the sky take about forty-five seconds to hit the ground. Less than ten minutes into 2018, two other officers, parked a few blocks over, fled Cuyler-Brownsville when bullets took out a street lamp overhead. All through the neighborhood, pavements and doorsteps glistened with brass shell casings. We heard hundreds of rounds—from shotguns, pistols of all calibres, a Kalashnikov. At the corner of Fortieth and Florance, there was a scrap of crime-scene tape, from an incident the week before.

At 12:11 A.M., Skinner was dispatched to the site of a burning car. But, before he got there, another call came in, and he was sent to the Live Oak neighborhood to investigate more gunfire. "You can commit felonious aggravated assault with a firearm for fifteen minutes," Skinner joked. The city has installed a costly but discerning gunfire-detection network, called ShotSpotter, with receptors in high-crime areas; that night, ShotSpotter was so overwhelmed that it was operating on a lag of around five hours.

It often falls to the police to handle what Skinner calls "the social work of last resort." One night, as the temperature dropped into the twenties, he spotted a person in dark clothing skulking through an empty parking lot, near the site of a recent unsolved robbery. He pulled into the lot, and as he got closer his headlights illuminated an aging black woman with a sunken face, wearing a Santa hat and a leopard-print jacket. "You doing O.K.?" Skinner asked.

"I was trying to get to Walgreens," she said. She looked at the ground and spoke slowly, in subdued, raspy tones. "Everybody mad at me," she said.

"They're not too mad at you, are they?" Skinner said.

"They say I'm a troublemaker."

"You're not a troublemaker. What's your first name?"

"Norma Jeane." She was too cold to make it to the Walgreens, she said, and so Skinner told her to hop in the car. After he closed the windows and turned up the heat, Norma Jeane lit up. "I'm named after Marilyn Monroe," she said. "I'm gonna be a superstar."

She launched into tales from her past, with characters and events entering and vanishing from her story as spontaneously, it seemed, as they had in her life. As a young child, she said, "I took my brothers with me, and we got baptized" at a church on May Street, just north of Cuyler-Brownsville. "They say, 'Where are your parents?' And I said, 'They're both alcoholics.'" The rest was a chronological blur, a half century of hardship, arguments, scarcity, and violence. As we approached Walgreens, the McDonald's next door caught her attention.

Skinner asked if she was hungry, and she asked if he would get her some pancakes and sausages, since she hadn't eaten all day. Skinner pulled into the drive-through. "If I sit down, it hurts," Norma Jeane said. "Feels like I got polio. That's why I keep walking. I know how to walk, and I ain't scared. I never been scared. I been walking these streets since I was five."

When Norma Jeane mentioned that someone had once given her a calico cat, Skinner asked for its name.

"I didn't know no better name than Calico," Norma Jeane said.

"That's awesome—I have an orange cat named Orangey," Skinner replied. "He's so mean, though. I usually just call him Mean Cat."

"Oh, boy, I love cats! I turn cats into dogs," Norma Jeane said.

Norma Jeane carried a wooden cane and a black handbag, in which she kept her Bible, an empty pickle jar that she used as a wallet, a cracked cell phone with no battery, a magnifying glass, and an old bottle for Seroquel, an antipsychotic medication used to treat bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. She said that the pills made her sleepy, so she'd stopped taking them long ago. She also has diabetes, but she couldn't afford health insurance or treatment. "I haven't taken insulin in three years," she said.

Norma Jeane's food arrived. It cost a little more than six dollars. Skinner paid with a twenty and put the change in Norma Jeane's pickle jar. "I wish I could have a dill pickle, but I ain't got my teeth on," she said. "I love them Hot Mama pickles, sour pickles . . ." She trailed off.

"Where are you gonna spend tonight?" Skinner asked.

"I could go—what time is it?"

"It's two-forty-one in the morning."

"I'm trying to think," she said. "I got to go where it's clean. You know someplace I can go?" As a warm city in the Deep South, Savannah attracts many homeless people, but its overcrowded shelters had locked their doors around dusk. "I need to go to a Waffle House," she concluded. "It's open twenty-four hours. I'll go in there and play the jukebox."

Skinner notified the precinct of the plan, and pulled into the Waffle House parking lot, on Abercorn Street. Norma Jeane walked over to a booth in the corner. Then she took off her Santa hat and started messing up her hair, pulling strands so that they'd stick out in all directions. "This way, everybody gonna think I'm crazy," she said. "No one gonna come up to me, this way. No one gonna hurt me."

Back in the car, Skinner explained that part of his motivation in helping Norma Jeane was to prevent an emergency call, three hours later, of a homeless woman freezing to death. "Think of all the shit that went wrong in this



country for Norma Jeane to be sitting in the car with us," he said. Although schizophrenia affects a little more than one per cent of Americans, it's a factor in a high percentage of police calls. A few hours earlier, Skinner had checked on a schizophrenic man who calls the police multiple times each night, reporting paranoid hallucinations; the department can never ignore a call, because he is the legal owner of a .357 Magnum revolver, and officers told me that he once tried to execute an intruder in his front yard. At times, Skinner feels as if the role of a police officer were to pick up the pieces of "something that has broken in every single possible way."

"A huge amount of what police actually do is support and service and problem-solving," David M. Kennedy told me. "And part of what's so inside out is that most of that activity is not recognized." Police officers are increasingly filling the gaps of a broken state. "They do it essentially on their own, usually without adequate training and preparation, often without the skills they need, and overwhelmingly without the resources and institutional connections that it would take to do those things well."

Twenty-seven hours after we left Norma Jeane at the Waffle House, another cop radioed in an E.M.S. call. A fifty-nine-year-old homeless woman, dressed in a Santa hat and a leopard-print jacket, was freezing to death.

In February, Skinner began a permanent beat, from 2:30 P.M. to 11 P.M. Residents have begun to get used to him. In March, during a foot chase in Cuyler-Brownsville, two women—one of whom he'd put in handcuffs the previous week—started cheering for him from their porches. "Go, Skinner, go!" they shouted, laughing. He'd lost sight of the suspect by then, and asked if a young man had just run past. On a block where the police never get tips, the women helped him narrow the search.

One recent Saturday night, two drunk men sitting in a park waved Skinner over. One of the men was trying to console his friend Kenneth, whose girlfriend had kicked him out and taken away his car keys. Suddenly, Kenneth stood up and reached for Skinner, to embrace him. Skinner hugged back.

A few minutes later, Skinner described the scene to an officer-in-training. She was aghast. At the police academy, cops are trained how to position their bodies when interacting with members of the public—one shoulder forward, gun hip always out of reach.

"I know—I lost tactical advantage," Skinner told her.

"Yeah!" the trainee said.

Skinner smiled. "I'm not looking for tactical," he said. "I'm looking for strategic." ♦

PROFILES

THROUGH THE PORTAL

Deana Lawson's photographs of diaspora.

BY ZADIE SMITH

Imagine a goddess. Envision a queen. Her skin is dark, her hair is black. Anointed with Jergens lotion, she possesses a spectacular beauty. Around her lovely wrist winds a simple silver band, like two rivers meeting at a delta. Her curves are ideal, her eyes narrowed and severe; the fingers of her right hand signal an army, prepared to follow wherever she leads. Is this the goddess of fertility? Of wisdom? War? No doubt she's divine—we have only to look at her to see that. Yet what is a goddess doing here, before these thin net curtains? What relation can she possibly have to that cheap metal radiator, the chipped baseboards, the wonky plastic blinds? Where is her kingdom, her palace, her worshippers? Has there been some kind of mistake?

Examining Deana Lawson's "Sharon" (2007), a black viewer may find the confusion of her earliest days reënacted. Before you'd heard of slavery and colonialism, of capitalism and subjection, of islands and mainlands, of cities and ghettos, when all you had to orient yourself was what was visually available to you; that is, what was in front of your eyes. And what a strange sight confronts the black child! The world seems upside down and back to front. For your own eyes tell you that your people, like all people, are marvellous. That they are—like all human beings—beautiful, creative, godlike. Yet, as a child, you couldn't find many of your gods on the television or in books; they were rarely rendered in oil, encountered on the cinema screen or in the pages of your children's



"Sharon" (2007).





"Wanda and Daughters" (2009).

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS: SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO. AND RHONA HOFFMAN GALLERY, CHICAGO

Bible. Sometimes, in old reruns, you might spot people painted up, supposedly to look like your gods—with their skin blackened and their lips huge and red—but the wise black child pushed such toxic, secondary images to the back of her mind. Instead, she placed her trust in reality. But here, too, she found her gods walking the neighborhood unnoticed and unworshipped. Many of them appeared to occupy lowly positions on a ladder whose existence she was only just beginning to discern. There were, for example, many low-wage gods behind the counters at the fast-food joints, and mostly gods seemed to shine shoes and clean floors, and too many menial tasks altogether appeared to fall only to them. Passing the newsstand, she might receive her first discomforting glimpse of the fact that the jail cells were disproportionately filled with gods, while in the corridors of power they rarely set a foot. Only every now and then did something make sense: a god was recognized. There's little Michael Jackson and grand Toni Morrison, and, look, that's James Baldwin growing old in France, and beautiful Carl Lewis, faster than Hermes himself. The kinds of gods so great even the blind can see them. But back at street level? Too many gods barely getting by, or crowded into substandard schools and crumbling high-rise towers, or harassed by police intent on clearing Olympus of every deity we have. And, for a long, innocent moment, everything about this arrangement will seem surreal to the black child, distorted, like a message that has somehow been garbled in the delivery. Then language arrives, and with language history, and with history the Fall.

Deana Lawson's work is prelapsarian—it comes before the Fall. Her people seem to occupy a higher plane, a kingdom of restored glory, in which diaspora gods can be found wherever you look: Brownsville, Kingston, Port-au-Prince, Addis Ababa. Typically, she photographs her subjects semi-nude or naked, and in cramped domestic spaces, yet they rarely look either vulnerable or confined. ("When I'm going out to make work," Lawson has said, "usually I'm choosing people that come from a lower- or working-class situation. Like, I'm choosing people around the neighborhood.") Outside a Lawson portrait you might be working three jobs, just keeping your head above water, struggling. But inside her frame you are beautiful, imperious, unbroken, unfallen.

Born in 1979 and raised in prelapsarian Rochester, New York—well before the collapse of Kodak—Lawson arrived in the world with a matchless origin story: her grandmother

cleaned the home of George Eastman, the founder of the Kodak empire. (In what she has called the "mythology" of her family, her grandmother overheard Eastman ask his nurse where his heart was situated, the morning before he shot himself through the chest.) Kodak was foundational in practical ways, too. When Lawson's mother applied for a factory job there, the man who interviewed her felt that she was more suited to office work, and so instead she landed an administrative job, which she kept for the next thirty-nine years. The Lawsons thus found themselves in an interesting social position: "middle-class-aspiring," living on the working-class East Side of Rochester but not on blue-collar salaries, and with a father, a manager at Xerox, who, as Lawson has described him, was an avid family photographer, daily documenting Deana and her identical twin, Dana, in times both happy and sad.

On one memorable occasion, he took a picture of the twins on the stoop together, Dana with a recently broken thumb and Deana holding her sister's cast in her own hand: "We're both dressed exactly alike. We both have the same frowns on our head. That picture kind of pierced me. I think that was, like, the beginning of identifying with another person, or trying to understand another human being's pain, in a way, through looking at myself." This self-in-other experience intensified years later, when Lawson's sister, then seriously ill with multiple sclerosis, permanently dropped out of Penn State (the twins had arrived together), leaving Lawson with the weight of her family's expectations on her shoulders. ("When my sister got sick, I had to win for both of us.") It was in college that Lawson wriggled out of her business major and started taking photographs. From the outset, they were "staged"—like a family portrait, only more so—for she always liked to choose the people, the setting, the clothes, and the pose.

As Cindy Sherman has amply demonstrated, the most obvious route for a photographer with these anti-vérité instincts might be the self-portrait, but in the bulk of her work Lawson appears only in relation: she is the unseen person whom all these striking-looking people are looking at. How she manages to create this relation is a fascinating question. In person, Lawson—a striking woman in her own right—has a soft-spoken, rather shy manner that seems to belie the fearlessness and will it must surely require to travel to far-flung places, talk your way into strangers' homes, and then get them to pose precisely as you want. (My own response upon seeing her work for the first time was: How do you convince Jamaicans to take their clothes off?) To do so, you would need to know how to listen, but also how to ask the right question, and at the right moment. You'd have to be self-effacing and yet forceful enough to pursue significant leads. With her ethnographic skills, and in her choice of destinations, Lawson might remind us of Zora Neale Hurston, whose idiosyncratic 1938 anthropological study of voodoo and folk practices in the diaspora, "Tell My Horse," traverses some of the same territory to which Lawson has been drawn—Jamaica, Haiti—and is a text that Lawson herself has cited as an early inspiration.

Like Lawson, Hurston was constitutionally attracted to the marginalized, the obscure, the ostensibly lowly. And, like Hurston, Lawson's fullest subject is the diaspora itself. Looking at "Otisha" (2013), in which a young, naked Jamaican woman poses like a piece of West African statuary among the many leatherette couches that fill a cramped and overdecorated living room in Kingston, I thought of the Pocomania (or Pukkumina) cult that Hurston encountered in Jamaica, and which she heard a local man define as the compulsion to make "something out of nothing." The diaspora is a broad and various thing, but one rich vein running through it has surely been the historical, economic, and personal necessity of making "something out of nothing." In an illuminating conversation that Lawson had with Arthur Jafa, a Los Angeles-based artist and filmmaker, Jafa sketches this journey from nothing to something in miniature:

> Initially, when Africans step off those ships they have the same battery of cultural verification and affirmation that most people have. But a defining experience for black people during slavery is the separating of folks from their children, from their partners, from their families. So, very quickly, Africans become a new kind of people, black people. We create culture in free fall, but we also create kinship in free fall.

Jafa, too, is a diaspora explorer. (His 2017 video installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art, in L.A., "Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death," was set to Kanye West's sublime gospel-inflected "Ultralight Beam," and used a huge variety of found film footage to create a phantasmagoria of black images through history.) In their conversation, which will be published later this year in "Deana Lawson: An Aperture Monograph," Lawson and Jafa declare themselves profoundly interested in this new kind of people, a concern that never aspires to a sociological neutrality but, instead, pulses with love. Black people are not conceived as victims, social problems, or exotics but, rather, as what Lawson calls "creative, godlike beings" who do not "know how miraculous we are." In her work, she tells Jafa, she wants "to try to locate the magnificent and have it come through in the picture." In response, Jafa notes, "It's like black people are inherently scarred by our circumstances, and you're trying to take photographs of them that look past that, like an X-ray looks past surface scars."

Which is not to say that the surface scars pass unrecorded in Lawson's photographs. Circumstances are in no way hidden or removed from the shot; nothing is tidied up or away, and everything is included. Dirty laundry is aired in public (and appears on the floor). Half-painted walls, faulty wiring, sheetless mattresses, cardboard boxes filled with old-format technology, beat-up couches, frayed rugs, curling tiles, broken blinds. (It's instructive to contrast Lawson's staged portraits of low-income black folk with the young Californian photographer Buck Ellison's staged portraits of wealthy white folk, replete with the discreet symbols of wealth: wood panelling, cashmere sweaters, silk shirts, linen pants, polished chrome kitchen-cabinet handles, crystal tumblers.) That these circumstances should prove so



"Baby Sleep" (2009).



similar—from New York to Jamaica, from Haiti to the Democratic Republic of the Congo—carries its own political message. But the repetition also takes on a mystical cast, as we note visual leitmotifs and symbols that seem to reoccur across time, space, and cultures. Paragraphs could be written on Lawson's curtains alone: cheap curtains, net curtains, curtains taped up—or else hanging from shower rings—curtains torn, faded, thin, permeable. Curtains, like doors, are an attempt to mark off space from the outside world: they create a home for the family, a sanctuary for a people, or they may simply describe the borders of a private realm. In these photographs, though, borders are fragile, penetrable, thin as gauze. And yet everywhere there is impregnable defiance—and aspiration. There is "kinship in free fall."

In "Living Room" (2015), taken in Brownsville, Brooklyn, all the scars are visible: the taped-up curtain, the boxes and laundry, the piled-up DVDs, that damn metal radiator. At its center pose a queen and her consort. He's on a chair, topless, while she stands unclothed behind him. They are physically beautiful—he in his early twenties, she perhaps a little older—and seem to have about them that potent mix of mutual ownership and dependence, mutual dominance and submission, that has existed between queens and their male kin from time immemorial. But this is only speculation. The couple keep their counsel. Despite being on display, like objects, and partially exposed—like their ancestors on the auction block—they maintain a fierce privacy, bordered on all sides. They are exposed but well defended: salon-fresh hair, with the edges perfect; a flash of gold in her ear; his best bluejeans; her nails on point. Self-mastery in the midst of chaos. And the way they look at you! A gaze so intense that it's the viewer who ends up feeling naked.

When you create kinship in free fall, you may grab at certain items on the fly. The similarity between these items constitutes its own realm of interest. How often we find—especially in the more comfortable homes—luxurious sateen in brown and gold, heavy



"Mama Goma" (2014).

brown wood, silver jewelry, fabrics of dark green and dark red, tiles and wallpaper intricately patterned in geometric form. (I am describing my own mother's living room as surely as any Lawson has photographed.) What deep satisfaction, then, to stand in front of "Kingdom Come" (2014), in which two young Ethiopians in Addis Ababa, a boy and a girl, stand ramrod straight, staring out at us, dressed in the Coptic-like finery of their church. Their gowns are a dark-red velvet, threaded with silver embroidery; the walls behind them are deep red, too, and panelled in dark wood; gold crosses hang behind them. In such an image, you find yourself able to track the aesthetic roots of so much of what Lawson has shown us in diasporic living rooms worldwide: the red and the gold, the geometric patterns, the heavy wood, and that ubiquitous silver bling in which, elsewhere, Lawson photographs a bedazzled New Yorker, "Joanette" (2013), who has stripped to the waist, the better to highlight her silver bangles, her silver hoops, her silver rings. Kinship in free fall, yes, but still connected, however tenuously, to the thick braid of our African heritage, cut off at the root so long ago.

Sometimes, as in a picture like "Mama Goma" (2014), taken in Gemena, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, that heritage feels close at hand. A young, heavily pregnant woman stands in a cheap-looking shiny blue dress, meant to imitate the finest satin, with a large hole cut in the middle from which her bump protrudes. Her palms face upward, like someone about to begin a ritual or ceremony. Behind her, sprays of cheap tinsel are pinned to the wall; before her, a silver spoon sits on a table like an offering. The remnants of ancient faiths and previous glories touch the edges of the frame; echoes of the Vili people of the Kingdom of Loango, maybe, who traded their copper, finely carved objets d'art, and luxurious fabrics with the people of Holland, a historical memory that is here transmuted—but somehow not reduced—into a tablecloth patterned with flowers and a Dutch windmill that turns no more. In "Hotel Oloffson Storage Room" (2015), a naked woman, perhaps an employee of the hotel in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, perches on the edge of a discarded bed, surrounded by old mattresses, old chair cushions, and old hotel art. These simple paintings have been left half-forgotten in the lowliest corner of a tourist spot—one is of trees, the other of three mystical-looking owls—but in their humble way

they each make reference to Haiti's storied art factions, the Jacmel school (dominated by landscape art) and the Saint-Soleil school (incorporating voodoo symbolism). Meanwhile, on the door hangs an amateurish bust of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Haiti's revolutionary general. And in all this décor—in the cushion covers and the bedspread, the walls and the art itself—that red, green, and gold persist, framing our mysterious nude and, like her, retaining an innate magnificence.

You make something out of nothing. You borrow, steal, adapt. Sometimes, in Lawson, this adaptation involves direct quotation. (Her "Three Women," 2013, which poses naked girls standing in Beyoncé-like formation, recalls Albert Arthur Allen's naked chorus lines of the nineteen-twenties; in "Ashanti," 2011, a nude on a sheetless mattress in a grim, bare room assumes the position of the figure in Ingres's "Grande Odalisque.") More often, the referents seem to come from intimate experience. I'll bet there are diaspora folk stretching from London to Kingston to Detroit who will recognize, as Lawson does, how many couches can be squeezed into a space that cannot really accommodate that many couches, and, moreover, how one couch in particular will be a matter of special pride, and therefore covered with plastic for its own protection.

This bold visual recognition of rarely acknowledged commonalities is a great source of pleasure in Lawson's work. One of the things many people in the diaspora have shared—unavoidably—is the experience of poverty, but Lawson's work suggests other, deeper vectors that may also connect us: certain gestures and interpersonal attitudes, strategies of escape, modes of defense or display, pleasures and fears, aesthetics, superstitions, and, perhaps most significant, shared fantasies. First among these is an idealized vision of Africa. Of course, Africa has an independent reality, made up of fifty-four separate states, but Lawson isn't trying to capture that reality any more than she is photographing Detroit when she sets up her camera in that city. Naturalism is never the intention. Everything has an otherworldly aura, each space is both the particular and the universal, and each person at once an individual and a symbol, an archetype, an avatar. "Africa," in Lawson's photographs, is unabashedly the site where diasporic longing, fantasy, and sentiment—after much journeying and seeking—finally converge and are fulfilled.

When I look at Lawson's women, for example, this sentimental instinct in me grows particularly strong. I see Nicole—"Nicole" (2016)—a young mother lounging provocatively on her own rug, her kid's toys piled up behind her, and up surge the catchphrases of the day: *slay*, *queen; you go*, *girl; you get yours;* and so on. But a picture like "Wanda and Daughters" (2009) defies such easy sloganeering. Wanda, in her mid-forties, is resting against a tree, while her two daughters rest on her. They are in the midst of nature but are dressed in their city best: gold hoops and silver rings for Wanda, perfectly braided hair with many-colored bows for her girls. Wanda has a face like thunder: I dare you to mess with her. Easy to think her a queen, or, if you prefer, an African lioness, protecting her cubs. But you can also read this photograph sequentially rather than sentimentally, moving from face to face, and find a more ambivalent story. Wanda's fierce gaze tells us that she has sampled the tree of knowledge, that she knows the ways of the world. She's known for a long time. But her melancholy firstborn is only just discovering how things are, and her younger daughter, with her beaming smile, is still (happily!) in that Eden of innocence in which Lawson has pointedly framed the three of them. Which raises the question: When we call black women queens or lionesses, or when we call Asian mothers tigers—or any of the other colorful terms we conjure up to describe minority women fighting the daily battles of their lives—what are we doing? We come to praise. But, at the same time, don't we bury—and implicitly sanction—the idea that a fierceness like Wanda's is the bare minimum needed to raise a black family? I'm again reminded of the ladies in Buck Ellison's pictures: languid, relaxed, sometimes a little bored, at worst a little impatient for the camera to go *click*. They have not the slightest touch of fierceness about them. But, then, they have no need of it.

In the history of photography that has concerned itself with Africa and its diaspora, the concept of the portal has been central. In a newspaper, say, a photograph of a black subject is usually conceived as a window onto another world. Even the most well-meaning journalistic images of black life have the intention of enabling a passage, from the First World to the Third, for example, or from one side of the railway tracks to the other. It might be impossible for a black photographer in a largely white art world ever to wholly divest herself of this way of seeing, but in Lawson's "Portal" (2017) we come as close as I can imagine. What are we looking at? A ripped hole in a couch. That's all: no human figures, no other context. Just a hole in the kind of couch with which Lawson has made us, by now, very familiar. After staring at it awhile, you might notice that it is almost Africa-shaped, but what you see initially is its magical properties. Like the voodoo practitioners Zora Neale Hurston met in Haiti, Lawson has the rare capacity of being able to take an everyday domestic object and connect it to the spiritual realm. Her work does not show us "how the other half lives." Rather, it opens up a portal between the everyday and the sacred, between our finite lives and our long cultural and racial histories, between a person and a people. "Portal" presents, in abstract, what Lawson is doing in every other photograph:

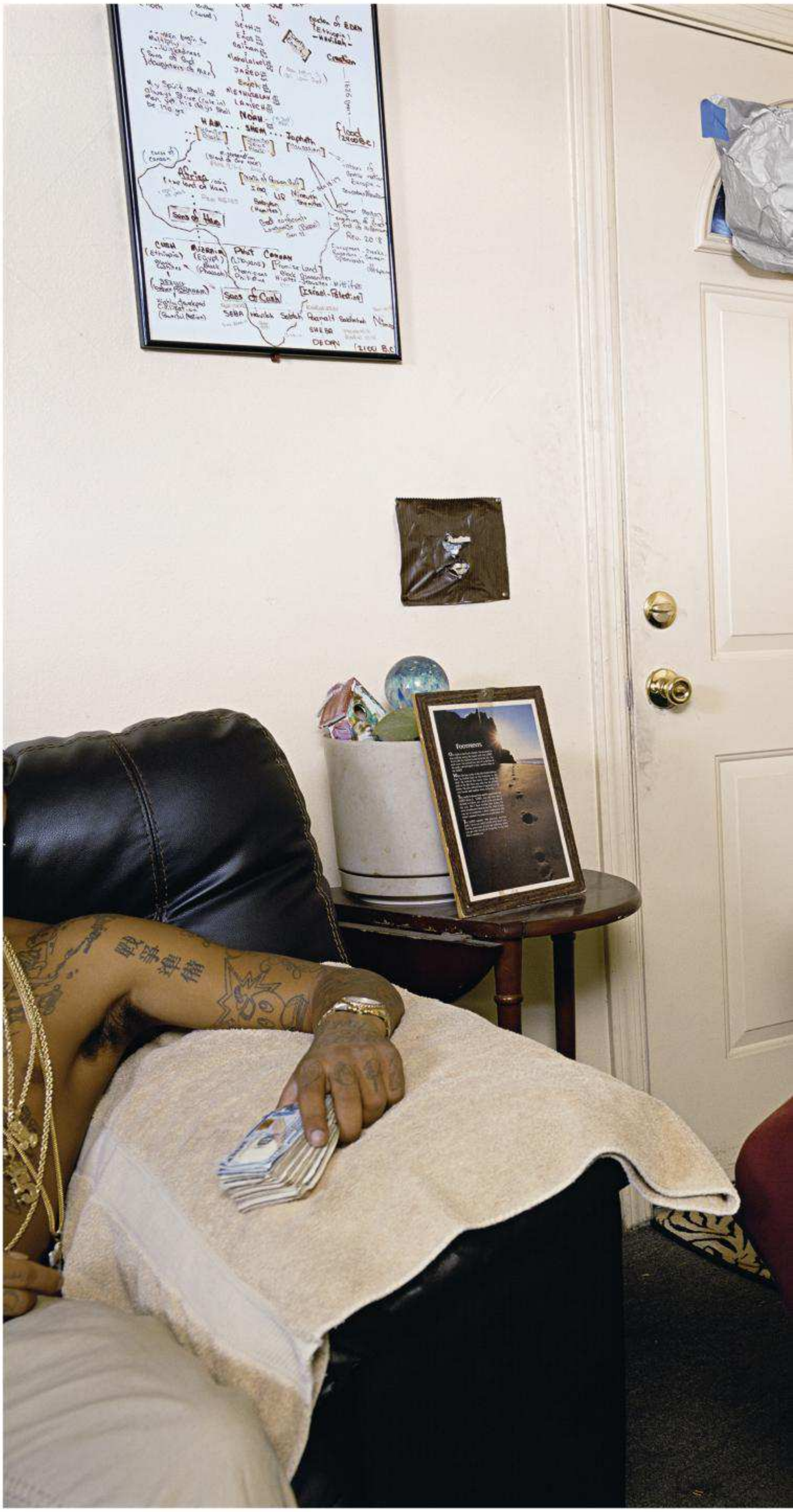
> I feel a lot of the figures that I use, I want them to be like a pivotal point, or like a vehicle or a vessel for something else. Diane Arbus was always keen on this idea of what the photograph is and what it does. What you see in the photograph is one thing; the specifics or what it references or what it's symbolic of is greater than that. She said the subject is always more complex than the picture.

What you see is not what you get. We are more than can be seen. We are here and elsewhere. Some of Lawson's portals appear to facilitate a crossing over into the realm of myth and fable, especially in her pictures of young black men, whom she has several times photographed in groups, emerging from pitch-black backgrounds, like

figures painted by Caravaggio. Out of the void they come, riding in on horseback ("Cowboys," 2014) or throwing gang symbols with their hands ("Signs," 2016). Both idealized by Lawson (in their physical beauty) and pathologized by the culture (as symbols of violence or fear), they are largely liberated from the kinds of domestic circumstance and context in which Lawson tends to frame her women. Such images are transhistorical, transpersonal, transcendent, and take at least some of their inspiration from previous portals, as Lawson explains to Jafa:

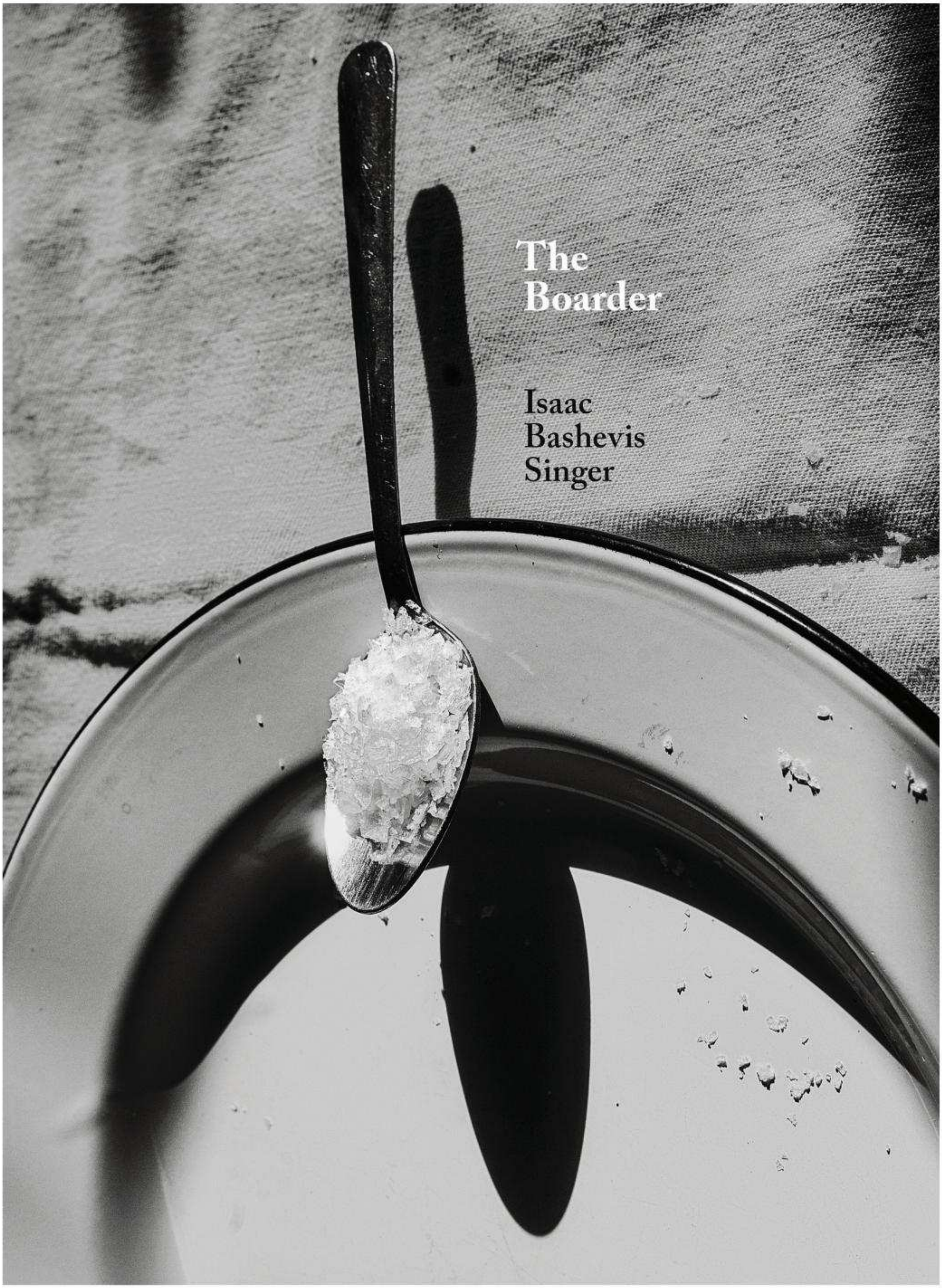
> Jorge Luis Borges and just his writing of "The Aleph," and the center of the world is pinpointed in the basement. Or, in "The Matrix," the oracle was the black woman in the kitchen smoking a cigarette and making cookies. Like, that's where, like, the shit is—the knowledge. That's the site of another dimension, maybe, but we don't know it. That information has been distorted. But if black folks really knew that, we'd just be on a different plane.

To reach this plane, you must pass through a portal—or maybe it's a veil, or a curtain. Where should you seek it? There are some obvious points of entry you might visit—funeral homes, voodoo festivals—but you should also try places more obscure: broken couches, broken blinds, broken windows. Don't give up. The reward will be great, once you arrive. In recent years, Lawson has begun explicitly framing this destination: she has taken a picture of a loving, naked couple in the lush Congolese forests, half hidden in the undergrowth ("The Garden," 2015) and another of beaux fondly clinging, half-dressed, posed together in tropical gardens ("Oath," 2013). These images are infused with a spirit of fantasy, set as they are in a dreamed-of Africa, an imagined and beloved homeland where harmony reigns, reunited souls pledge their troth, and glorious black bodies luxuriate, unashamed, in a natural environment. This isn't a practical or political reality but a state of mind, sacred precisely because it is literally unattainable and geographically fantastic. This Africa of the mind contains Detroit and Kingston and Port-au-Prince and Brownsville. It is eternal and everywhere. It is in all of us. It is the portal that leads us back to ourselves. ♦



"Sons of Cush" (2016).


Mini
Chips Ahoy!



The Boarder

Isaac Bashevis Singer

PHOTOGRAPH BY JACK DAVISON

Outside, there was the rumbling of a truck that wouldn't start. It rattled and gasped as if its metal soul were about to expire. Children were playing baseball and screaming wildly. The air coming through the open window smelled of gasoline, scallions, and the beginning of summer. Around the ceiling light, a swarm of flies eddied, droning monotonously. Through the window, hung with Dutch curtains, a butterfly flew in and landed on the table. It stood motionless, its wings together, waiting with the fatalistic calm of a creature that lives for only a short time. Reb Berish Zhichliner, in prayer shawl and phylacteries, had already finished his proper prayers, but he kept on reciting additional supplications, which are repeated only by the very pious and by those who have a lot of time.

Reb Berish's beard was white, and his face was red. He had bushy brows, and double bags hanging under his eyes. It had been only two years since he retired from his business in fabric remnants. For forty years, he'd had a pushcart on the Lower East Side, and also here in Williamsburg. His wife, his son, and a daughter had died during this time. Another daughter was living with a Gentile husband somewhere in California. Nothing was left to Reb Berish except his pension, a grave site in the cemetery that belonged to the Sochaczew Society, and an apartment on Clymer Street. In order not to live alone, he'd taken in a refugee as a boarder, a man who'd come back from the camps, spent time in Soviet Russia, and then wandered through half the world. His name was Morris Melnik. He contributed fifteen dollars a month toward the rent. At the moment, he was still sleeping in his room, which had a window that gave onto a fire escape.

Reb Berish had taken him in more out of pity than for the fifteen dollars. Morris Melnik had lost everything: his parents, his sisters and brothers, his wife, and his child. Still, Reb Berish regretted ever having opened his home. Melnik was a mocker and an unbeliever, a lecher, a contrary creature. He tried monkey business with the neighborhood women. He mixed meat and milk dishes. He came home at two o'clock in the morning and slept until a little before noon. He didn't pray, didn't observe the Sabbath. Just as Reb Berish began to recite the Thirteen Principles of Faith, Melnik entered the room: a little man whose face was yellowed as if by jaundice and whose head bore only a few stray strands of black and gray hair. He wore red pajamas and shabby slippers. He hadn't yet shaved, and there were black shadows on his sunken cheeks. He had a pointed chin, a thin bony nose. His small eyes were hidden behind long, needle-like eyebrows. He reminded Reb Berish of a hedgehog. When he opened his mouth, he revealed a line of teeth studded with gold fillings. He said, "Are you still praying, Reb Berish?"

"Well . . ."

"To whom are you praying? To the God who made Hitler and gave him the strength to kill six million Jews? Or perhaps to the God who created Stalin and let him liquidate another ten million victims? Really, Reb Berish, you're not going to bribe the Lord of the Universe with a pair of phylacteries. He's a first-class son of a bitch and a terrible anti-Semite."

"*Pfui*." Reb Berish grimaced. "Go away."

"How long will we keep cringing before Him and singing Psalms?" Melnik continued. "I've seen with my very own eyes how they threw a Jew with a prayer shawl and phylacteries into a ditch full of shit. Literally."

Reb Berish's red face turned even redder. He was in a hurry to finish the Articles of the Creed so that he could answer his lodger. He murmured, "I believe in perfect faith that there will be a resurrection of the dead at a time when it shall please the Creator. Blessed be His name, and exalted be the remembrance of Him forever and ever." He closed the prayer book but left his index finger inside, so that he could open it again at the same spot after he'd given Melnik a proper answer. He sighed and grumbled.

"Will you stop blaspheming? I don't tell you how to behave, and don't you try to teach me. No matter what you've seen, the Almighty is still a merciful God. We don't know His ways. If we knew Him, we'd be like Him. Free choice was granted to us, and that's that. Those who threw that Jew into the filth will never leave Gehenna, and his blessed soul will rest at the Throne of Glory."

"Nonsense. Empty words. Where is the soul? There is no soul, Reb Berish. It was invented by idlers in the study house. In Russia, there was a Professor Pavlov, and he was the greatest of them all. A real big shot, as they say in America. He cut out the brains of a dog and he found no soul there. A brain is a machine, just like in an automat. You throw in three nickels and out comes a sandwich. The machine doesn't need your nickels. You can put in wooden slugs. It was just made that way, and nothing else."

"You compare a saintly man to a dog or an automat. You should be ashamed of yourself, Mr. Melnik. A machine is a machine, and man is created in the image of God."

"The image of God! I sat in the Moscow prison in a cell with the Rabbi of Bludnov. For seven weeks, we sat together, and in all that time he did one thing: studied the Torah. He suffered from hemorrhoids, and when he sat on the chamber pot he bled like an animal. In the middle of the night, they'd wake him up and take him for an interrogation. I could hear him screaming, and when he returned he couldn't walk anymore. They pushed him into the cell, and he fell down on the floor. We revived him as best we could. After seven weeks of torture, they took him out one night to be shot."

"Well, so did he protest about God's injustice?"

"No, he remained a believer until his last breath."

Reb Berish winced and rubbed his forehead. "When free choice is given, free choice is given. It means that the wicked have the power to do wickedness as they please. Does the government here on earth not give free choice? Every gangster can kill, steal, rob until he's caught. But when he's caught he gets his due."

"The Nazis didn't get their due, Reb Berish. I was in Munich after the war. They were all sitting in a huge beer hall, red and fat like pigs, swilling beer and singing Nazi songs with wild voices. They boasted openly about how many Jews they'd burned, gassed, buried alive, and about how many Jewish girls they'd raped. You should have heard their laughter. America was sending them billions of dollars, and they poured the

Bayerisches down their gullets and gobbled their *Weisswurst*. Their paunches almost burst with pleasure. When I entered, and they recognized that I was a Jew, they became like beasts. They wanted to finish me off right on the spot."

"Why did you go into such a place?"

"I had a German girlfriend there. I smuggled gold and she hid it. We worked, as they say, fifty-fifty. And we had another business besides."

"*Pfui*, you're no better than they are."

"What could I do? The Jewish girls were all sick and bitter. When you lay down with them, they did nothing but complain until your ears popped. All they wanted was to get married and settle down. But not me. With a German girl, you got what you wanted, without any fuss. For a pack of American cigarettes, you could have had Himmler's widow."

"Do me a favor and keep quiet. If you're not going to let me pray in peace, be so good as to move out of the house. We're not a good match."

"Don't scold me, Reb Berish. As far as I'm concerned, you can pray from morning until evening. Keep on flattering God, tell Him how great He is, how good, how merciful, and He'll prepare a second Hitler for you. They're already preparing. America's sending them airplanes. One day they'll give them the atomic bomb, too. On your taxes, Reb Berish, Germany is being rearmed. This is the truth."

Reb Berish clutched his beard. "This is not the whole truth yet. Please, go back to your room, and let me continue with my prayers."

"Continue, continue. The one who begrudges you should grow a horn on his belly."

After prayers, Reb Berish began to rummage around the kitchen and prepare breakfast. Actually, it was a combination of breakfast and lunch, because Reb Berish ate only two meals a day. He rummaged and sighed. The doctor had forbidden everything he liked: salt, pepper, sauerkraut, radishes, mustard, herring, pickles, even butter and sour cream. What was left? Toast with farmer's cheese and a cup of weak tea. He could have eaten spinach or cauliflower, but he would never get used to that kind of food. Even the fruit in America didn't have the old home taste. The truth was that since his wife, Feige Malke, died, everything had lost its taste and its sense: going to bed, getting up in the morning, receiving a check from Uncle Sam, even the Sabbaths and holy days. Reb Berish had many times made up his mind not to have any more conversations with his boarder, the charlatan who had gone through hell and remained no good. But sitting alone at the table was also hard. Somehow this grumbling boarder's harsh words took the place of onion, horseradish, garlic, or a glass of vodka. They made his heart beat faster, heated the blood in his veins. Reb Berish called out, "Hey, Mr. Melnik, come and have a cup of tea."

Melnik immediately appeared at the door. He'd combed the hair over his bald spot and smeared it with pomade. He wore a pink shirt, a yellow tie with black dots, a pair of khaki Army pants, and Army shoes that one could buy cheaply. On the ring finger of his left hand, he wore a signet ring with a ruby, and around his wrist a watch with a gold band. In his shirt pocket, he had three fountain pens and two pencils with silver tops. After shaving and taking a bath, he seemed somehow younger. The bags under his eyes had flattened out. His eyes had become clearer. Reb Berish looked at him in amazement.

"Well, have something."

"What shall I have? If you had prepared such a table in the camps, it would have been something. I was there when they killed a Jew because he stole a potato. He was a relative of mine. There was a fellow in our camp who had a store. You can imagine what a store this was. He kept his merchandise in the bunk where he slept. If he had been caught, he would have been shot immediately. He would have been lucky if they shot him. They probably would have tortured him. But business is business. I've seen Jews martyred for business. So it was in the ghettos, and so it was in Russia. Because of a few spools of thread and a dozen needles, people were condemned to death. In the camps, such a merchant kept a few leaves of cabbage, some potato peels, and some wilted radishes: that was his trade. But hunger is a bitter thing. In the Russian camps, people got sick with scurvy, from a lack of vitamins. One dies from these sicknesses quite suddenly. I saw it happen once."

"Wait a moment, Mr. Melnik. Better take a slice of bread with cheese. Have some cherries."

"Thank you. I was lying on my bunk one winter night, somewhere in a camp in Kazakhstan, talking with my neighbor on the bunk across from me. It was so cold the water in the pail froze. We covered ourselves with all our rags. Outside, the frost was terrible. We were hungry, too, but we talked. What did we talk about? About wives and children who stayed with the Germans, and about the good old times, and what we would do when peace came again. We were going to do only one thing—eat. We pictured all the roasts and cakes we'd put away, the chicken soup with noodles, the stuffed derma, the onions in chicken fat, the schnitzels and cutlets. For a while, it was quiet. Then I asked my neighbor something, but he didn't answer. Did he fall asleep? I asked myself. And I listened. Usually, he snored, because he had polyps in his nose, but now he was strangely quiet. I slid down the bunk to take a look. The man was dead. One second he was talking, the next he was dead."

"Terrible, terrible."

"What are you crying for? This is humanity, the crown of creation. My theory is that all men are Nazis. What right do we have to slaughter a calf and eat it? The one with the knife slaughters. It's just as Hitler believed: might is right. As for God, He's a Nazi to end all Nazis. The arch-Hitlerite. He has more power than anybody else, so He tortures everybody. You see, I'm not an unbeliever. There is a Gehenna, there is. Why should people suffer only on earth? They're tortured in the hereafter, too. God has His own Treblinka, with devils, hobgoblins, demons, angels of death. They burn the poor sinners or hang them by their tongues or by their breasts. All the details are there in 'The Rod of Punishment.' But there's no paradise. When it comes to death, I become a real heretic."

Reb Berish stopped chewing. "Why would the Creator of the world be so cruel?"

"Why wouldn't He be? He's got the big stick, so He uses it. He's given us a Torah, which nobody can keep. Each little rabbi adds new laws, and if you break one of these laws you're reincarnated as a snake. The Christians maintain that God could not redeem man-

kind until He let His only son die on the Cross. One way or another, all He demands is blood."

"Well, better eat something. Too much talk only leads to iniquity."

"I'm eating. What else am I doing? The only thing that's left for me is eating. The women here in America are no good. The truth is that there are no more good women anywhere. In my time, there were still some faithful wives. Nowadays, that species has disappeared altogether. If you had seen what I saw, your white beard would have turned black again."

"I don't want to hear about it."

"I'm not talking about the camps. There a woman couldn't help herself. When one is afraid for one's life, one will do anything. I once heard a mother persuading her daughter to give herself to a scabby Ukrainian man because he could put more groats in her bowl of soup. She actually did it, and, when the Nazis learned about it, all three of them were murdered. Such events did not leave much of an impression—we became accustomed to them. But I witnessed even worse things. After we were freed, nobody was forced anymore, but they still wallowed in filth. We slept three families to a room. In one corner, a woman fornicated with a peasant, and in the other corner her sister did the same. They lost all sense of shame. They deloused themselves together and they fornicated together. One liked to do it by candlelight."

"Will you keep quiet or not? I'm warning you for the last time."

"Are you afraid of the truth?"

"This is not the truth. Sin is like froth. When you pour beer into a glass, you imagine that it's full, but two-thirds of it is froth. When the froth dissolves, only a third of the glass is left. The same thing is true of transgressions. They burst like bubbles."

"Well said. Is this your own thought?"

"I heard it from our rabbi."

"A nice saying, but I say that everything is filth. Nothing is real but filth. Your rabbi is also filth. Behind his beard and his sidelocks and the fringed garment is a man who loves females, and if he weren't married to a good-looking woman he would run to whores."

"Rascal! Betrayer of Israel!"

"Rascal, shmascal. I don't say that I'm a saint. I do anything I can. So what do you want from me? By the way, why don't you remarry? You're still healthy. I wouldn't leave you alone with a Gentile woman for a minute."

Reb Berish groaned. He set a fist on the table. With his other hand, he picked the crumbs from his beard. "Nonsense! You say the meanest things about women, but my Feige Malke, peace be with her, was a pious woman. She wouldn't even look at another man. She was just like my mother and my grandmother. What do you know, young man, about the modesty of women in the old times? In Warsaw, the murderers hanged an important woman, the wife of an elder, a saintly person. While they were dragging her to the gallows, she was afraid that her dress might rise above her knees and expose her to shame. So she put a pin into her dress, through her leg, and this was the way they hanged her."



"Were you there?"

"Others were there. My own aunt Deborah was a widow at twenty-three, and she never married again. They proposed her to a very wealthy man, but she said, 'I want to come pure to my Zorach in paradise.'"

"And you believe that she's there with him?"

"Yes, I do."

"Zorach isn't there, and she isn't there, either. Nothing remains of them but a heap of dust. She suffered in vain—this is what Morris Melnik says. In our town, there was a rich man, Reb Zadok, a scholar. He died and left his widow a great fortune. Exactly half a year later, she married an ignorant butcher named Chazkele Scab. She'd fallen in love with him at the butcher's block."

"Well, everything's possible."

"Everything's rotten."

Morris Melnik fell silent. He lifted a teaspoon and tried to balance it on the rim of a plate. The spoon shook, tipping toward the handle end, and Morris Melnik quickly poured a little salt into the bowl of the spoon to give it equilibrium. He bit his lower lip and one of his eyes opened wide. The other he shut, as if in a wink. He seemed to have taken it as an omen that the way the spoon fell would indicate how things really stood in the world.

Reb Berish shook his head, as if in agreement with an old truth, which, although one may doubt it, still makes one despair. He lifted a tuft of his beard and studied it, as though to convince himself that it was already white. Then he said, "When a worm is buried in garbage, how can it know that there are mansions, palaces, gardens? There's a proverb: A bedbug in the wall doesn't go to a ball. You keep on babbling about the earth, but there's a heaven with stars, constellations, emanations. There are angels, seraphim, cherubim, holy chariots. In comparison with them, our little world is a piece of dust, or even less. There are some sacred sparks, but they're hidden. Even in the mud you sometimes find a diamond. Amid all this filth, there is a Baal Shem, a Rabbi Elimelech, a Berditchever, a Kotzker. Where did they come from? My own grandfather Reb Chaim was a saint. For fifty years, he fasted each Monday and Thursday. He got up every midnight to lament the destruction of the temple, in summer as well as in winter. He gave away his last penny for charity. I saw it with my own eyes."

Reb Berish began to pound his chest, which was covered with a fringed garment. His face became redder, his beard trembled. Then he said, "You are misled, Mr. Melnik. However, a man cannot be judged in his moments of suffering. I'm going to say grace."

He took a glass, poured some water on his hands, and wiped them on the tablecloth. He began to recite aloud.

"Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who feedest the whole world with Thy Goodness, with Grace, with Loving Kindness . . ."

In that moment, the little spoon tipped into the plate. Morris Melnik's yellow eyes filled with laughter. He rose and went to the door. He said to himself, "Well, I guess I'll go see what the women are doing." ♦

(Translated, from the Yiddish, by the author.)

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A conversation with the Singer Estate's editor.

THE CRITICS



BOOKS

TO HAVE AND TO DO

In "Motherhood," Sheila Heti has a big decision to make.

BY ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ

If I were asked to describe the stage of life that I occupy now, at the age of thirty, it would not occur to me to say that I am a thus far childless woman of childbearing age. Yet that's doubtless how I will think of this time if I become a mother: as a finite, departed "before" that gave way to an ever after, just as childhood molted into adolescence, and adolescence ceded to adulthood. Each of those new phases yielded more degrees of autonomy, but motherhood works the opposite way. In "A Life's Work," a 2001 memoir of becoming a mother, Rachel Cusk writes that after her daughter's birth her "appetite for the world was insatiable, omnivorous, an expression of longing for some lost, pre-maternal self, and for the freedom that self had perhaps enjoyed, perhaps squandered." Nothing is freer than squandering freedom—at least, that's what I tell myself when I wonder if I'm making the best use of what may remain of mine.

In "Motherhood" (Henry Holt), Sheila Heti writes, "My mother often says, *You are free.* Perhaps I am. I can do what I like." Once again, she has. Like her breakthrough book, the formally freewheeling "How Should a Person Be?," "Motherhood" is a novel, or so its publisher claims, though even that loose and accommodating category doesn't convey the weird originality of this sometimes exasperating, sometimes illuminating work. Heti's narrator, who seems all but indistinguishable from Heti herself, calls it, at various points, "a book to prevent future tears," "a prophylactic," "a written defence," and "a wrestling place." Even "narrator" seems an awkward term here. "Interrogator" might be the better word, since, in place of telling a story, the novel asks a question. In the course of nearly three hundred pages, Heti examines and cross-examines herself to decide whether or not she should have a child before it is too late. The result, a kind of diary of a divided mind, serves as both a record of that deliberation and an insurance policy against an adverse outcome, by guaranteeing that Heti's struggle to understand and obey the mandate of her soul will end, either way, in a birth, even if what is born is made of ink and paper rather than of flesh and blood.

When her account begins, Heti is thirty-six, living in Toronto with her boyfriend, called Miles, a lawyer. From an earlier relationship, he has a young daughter, who lives abroad with her mother and visits in the summers, and he doesn't want to have another child. Heti writes, "If I want a child, we can have one, he said, *but you have to be sure.*" This is a curse disguised as a blessing. Women rarely get the chance to exercise their free will over their own fertility without encumbrance or coercion, but Miles's begrudging offer doesn't exactly inspire gratitude; he sounds like a deadbeat dad justifying his absence in advance. In any case, the condition he sets only reveals how ambivalent Heti truly is. "Whether I want kids is a secret I keep from myself—it is the greatest secret I keep from myself," she confesses:

> On the one hand, the joy of children. On the other hand, the misery of them. On the one hand, the freedom of not having children. On the other hand, the loss of never having had them—but what is there to lose? The love, the child, and all those motherly feelings that the mothers speak about in such an enticing way, as though a child is something to have, not something to do. The doing is what seems hard. The having seems marvellous.

Heti wonders whether she is attracted to the idea of kids as a way of satisfying her own vanity. "Do I want children because I want to be admired as the admirable sort of woman who has children?" she asks. "Because I want to be seen as a normal sort of woman, or because I want to be the best kind of woman, a woman with not only work, but the desire and ability to nurture, a body that can make babies, and someone who another person wants to make babies with?" The flip side of that promise of social validation, however, is the threat of domestic entrapment. When she was twenty-one, Heti writes, she terminated an accidental pregnancy. She had no doubts about her decision, but the doctor who examined her advised her to keep the baby; he even lied to her about when she could have the procedure done, as if a delay of a day or two might cause her to reconsider. Reflecting on this episode more than fifteen years later, Heti decides that the doctor, like other opponents of abortion, must have felt that "there is something threatening about a woman who is not occupied with children. . . . What is she going to do instead? What sort of trouble will she make?"

This is a familiar feminist reading of the anti-choice position, but it resonates with Heti in a newly intimate way, now that most women she knows are increasingly occupied with their

ABOVE: CLOË FLOIRAT



"Motherhood" is a diary of a divided mind. "The doing is what seems hard," Heti writes. "The having seems marvellous."

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMIE CAMPBELL

children rather than with the outside world where she still lives. Throughout her novel, Heti pays visits to various friends and their progeny. Mairon holds "her baby on her lap like he was a delicate toy" and prophesies that Heti, too, will soon be a mother. Nicola, mother of four, encourages Heti to spend time with her youngest child to get a sense of what parenting entails. Erica, a week before her due date, sends Heti a picture of a painting by Berthe Morisot (reproduced in the novel) of a mother leaning over a cradle. Erica thinks that the mother looks like Heti. Heti thinks that the mother looks bored.

"I feel like a draft dodger from the army in which so many of my friends are serving—just lolling about in the country they are making, cowering at home, a coward," Heti writes. If you have ever jumped aside to make room for a phalanx of strollers commandeering a narrow sidewalk, you will find the military metaphor to be apt. But her sense of separation is poignant, too. "How Should a Person Be?," which was published in Canada in 2010, when Heti was thirty-three, and two years later in the U.S., celebrated the excitement and the pleasure of friendship with other women, and with one woman in particular, Margaux, based on Heti's friend the painter Margaux Williamson. "How Should a Person Be?" is, in a way, a love story. Heti (or "Sheila," her fictional avatar) admits that she didn't have any friends until she was twenty-five, though she was briefly married at around the same age. Her friendship with Margaux was more thrilling, and more fulfilling, than her romantic relationship ever was; the novel is dedicated to her. But Margaux does not appear here. Nor do any other members of the earnest band of artists and theorizers who formed Heti's extended family of friends in her earlier novel, and their absence underscores her painful new state of isolation.

She can be petulant about what she sees as her abandonment. "I had always thought my friends and I were moving into the same land together, a childless land where we would just do a million things together forever," she writes. This is a startlingly childish vision of adult life, and, like a child, Heti expresses her disappointment and her fear of being left behind by throwing a sort of tantrum. "I resent the spectacle of all this breeding, which I see as a turning away from the living—an insufficient love for the rest of us, we billions of orphans already living," she writes. Heti isn't an orphan in any literal sense—both her parents are still alive—and there is something bratty about publicly stamping her foot and declaring her need for attention. But she feels like a neglected baby, and so she acts like one. It doesn't seem to occur to her that her mother friends, stuck at home, overextended and underslept, may feel neglected by her, too.

In the "Confessions," Augustine puzzles over a phrase from the first chapter of Genesis: "Be fruitful and multiply." God has just created man and woman, Adam and Eve; now He is commanding them to reproduce. Yet the trees and plants and the beasts of the earth also fruitfully multiply without having received any special blessing or commandment. Augustine concludes that God must be speaking in metaphor. "Fruitful," when applied to humanity, doesn't mean only physical reproduction; it refers "to the process of mental conception," the power of human beings to learn and reason, and so to create more knowledge.

Heti arrives at a similar idea. At one point, thinking of parents who have many children, she writes that "the egoism of childbearing is like the egoism



of colonizing a country—both carry the wish of imprinting yourself on the world, and making it over with your values, and in your image." In the game of argumentative Ping-Pong that she plays against herself, Heti can rush intemperately from one side to the other, and this idea of parent-as-colonizer seems a little nuts—until you remember God's promise to make Abraham's descendants "as numerous as the stars in the sky." Heti, who is Jewish, uses Biblical motifs throughout her novel (Jacob wrestling with the angel is a favorite), and her language, usually plain and loose, can in places take on a tone of heightened Old Testament solemnity. "In your image" is a clear echo of Genesis; elsewhere, she refers to "that longing for a holy completeness in the form of a child," as if she were imagining herself as one of those barren Biblical mothers who desperately petition God to bless their wombs. You get the sense that Heti wishes that, like a prophet, she could get a clear command from the divine, instructing her on what to do. But perhaps she has already done it. "My religious cousin, who is the same age as I am, she has six kids," Heti writes. "And I have six books. Maybe there is no great difference between us, just the slightest difference in our faith—in what parts of ourselves we feel called to spread."

This essentially Romantic sense of artistic vocation is at the center of Heti's novel. In "How Should a Person Be?," Sheila suffered excruciating writer's block as she tried to finish a play, commissioned years before by a small feminist theatre company, which she intended to "save the world." That lofty goal is ridiculous but also exhilarating; why write at all, if not for the highest possible stakes? In real life, Heti did complete the play that gave her so much trouble. Called "All Our Happy Days Are Stupid," it was produced in Toronto in 2014 and the following year in New York, where I happened to see it. It was close to pantomime, heavily stylized and difficult to decipher, a strange antithesis of the almost anarchically naturalistic novel that describes its agonized creation. The play didn't save the world, but, along with the success of "How Should a Person Be?," it seems to have saved Heti.



"How else would I keep my solar panels in the sun all day?"

• •

In "Motherhood," Heti is no longer a tortured artist, anxiously wondering whether she is making the right use of her talent. She is almost disconcertingly happy and productive—fertile, you might say. Writing fills her with a sense of joy and purpose. She describes an afternoon alone at home, "pacing in the sunlight before my 4:30 lecture, realizing how much writing has given me, and feeling so lucky that this passion was mine—right there, in the center of my life. And you are never lonely while writing, I thought, it's impossible to be—*categorically impossible*—because writing is a relationship. You're in a relationship with some force that is more mysterious than yourself."

Heti now sees her art not as a way to save the world but as a way to satisfy and accompany the self, and this relationship is what the prospect of motherhood threatens. Pacing in the sunlight in the middle of the afternoon, blithely unaware of the time rushing by, is a privilege reserved for the childless, like staying out dancing till four in the morning or going to the movies at a moment's notice. Plenty of writers are mothers, of course. But writing depends on hoarding time, on putting up a boundary (often at home) between oneself and the immediate world in order to visit a separate one in the mind. A mother must make herself always available. A writer needs to shut the door.

A number of books and essays in recent years have explored the tension between these two identities, and they are enough to strike fear into the heart of any writer who is contemplating motherhood. There is Cusk's bracing memoir, which, nearly twenty years after its publication, is still read and avidly discussed by women writers who have children or are considering having them; and there is Jenny Offill's 2014 novel, "Dept. of Speculation," whose protagonist dreamed as a young woman of being an "art monster," living only for her work, and is now consumed by motherhood instead. (Both Cusk and Offill have furnished Heti's book with admiring blurbs.) In a harrowingly honest essay called "Mother, Writer, Monster, Maid," published, in 2016, in the online women's magazine Vela, the novelist Rufi Thorpe describes the mind-numbing exhaustion of having no privacy at home, no time or space to herself. She is the body on which her infant depends. She can't even find the energy to read; how could she write? "Do I hate being a wife?" she

asks herself. "Do I hate being a mother?" She loves her husband and her young children with all her heart. "And yet, I am profoundly unfree."

There's that fateful word again. But is it possible that freedom is overrated, in life as in art? Cusk says that in motherhood she "found the concept of art and expression far more involving and necessary, far more human in its drive to bring forth and create, than I once did." Heti, for her part, admits that "not having a child allows a slip into sludginess, into the decadence of doing nothing but sitting before a computer, typing out words." Indeed, there is a lax, self-indulgent quality to the way that "Motherhood" circles the same questions with versions of the same arguments, at length. Much of the novel has the loose, jotted feel of a journal, minus the dates; there is a vague sense of time going by, but how much? ("I just read over a journal from a year ago and it could have been written today. Nothing but Nothing has changed! How maddening!," Heti writes late in the novel—a sentiment that will not be unfamiliar to her readers.) Along with the events of her daily life, Heti records dreams that are redolent with cryptic symbolism, and reports the results of an impromptu tarot reading, reproducing the lurid images of the cards themselves. She tries to parse the extreme ways in which her emotions and behaviors shift during her menstrual cycle, to the point of naming certain sections of her book after its phases ("Ovulating," "PMS," "Bleeding"), reports on her experiments with anti-depressants, and worries about her increasingly stormy relationship with Miles, who grows recalcitrant and unhelpful as Heti muddles through her dilemma. (Strangely, they do not use birth control, which adds a flippant Russian-roulette dimension to the drama.) He is like a photo negative of a stereotypical heterosexual male partner: he wants his woman to live for her art, not for children—a wonderfully supportive position, until it isn't.

Still, Miles's unwillingness to engage Heti in a real conversation around the things most on her mind leads to the greatest formal innovation in her book. At the start, she explains that she has devised a mock divination technique, loosely based on one used to consult the I Ching. She asks a yes-or-no question, then throws three coins: two or three heads means yes, two or three tails, no. The result is a series of ghostly, uncanny dialogues that manage to literalize the mysterious force—part guide, part confessor—with which Heti feels herself to be in communion while she is writing. Here is part of one, from early in the novel:

> I have to ask, am I like those pale, brittle women writers who never leave the house, who don't have kids, and who always kind of fascinated and horrified me?
>
> *yes*
>
> Is there anything I can do to avoid being that way?
>
> *yes*
>
> Is there real shame in being that way?
>
> *yes*
>
> Is *that way* basically selfish?
>
> *yes*
>
> And not as connected to the life force as other women, being so shut up in my thoughts and my head?
>
> *yes*
>
> Is there a male equivalent to this, well, barrenness?
>
> *no*
>
> Is there a romantic female figure that equals those male, romantic, artistic figures?
>
> *yes*
>
> Women artists with children?
>
> *yes*
>
> If I have children, will I be like those women?
>
> *no*

If God won't voluntarily speak to Heti, she will fashion a higher power for herself. The coins turn out to have a lancing, irreverent personality. They can be curt. They can be agreeable. They can be profound: "Is there a male equivalent to this, well, barrenness? *no*." They can, like any voice from the great beyond, be illogical, and they can be funny. Heti asks if she would have to give up writing in order to be a romantic female figure. *Yes*, the coins say. And would she have to dedicate her life to a man? *Yes*, the coins say. To Miles? *No*, the coins say. To her father? *Yes*, the coins say. Surprise! Should she move in with him now? *Yes*, the coins say:

> But wouldn't that make me unhappy?
>
> *yes*
>
> Wouldn't I be happier here?
>
> *yes*
>
> Does it matter whether a person is a romantic figure or not?
>
> *no*

Heti knows that she's falsely projecting "the wisdom of the universe" onto the coins. But, she says, "it's an interruption of my complacency—or at least that's what it feels like, to have to dig a little deeper, to be thrown off." That deeper digging takes courage and commitment. The coins force Heti to obey an authority beyond her control, which is, in a sense, the whole purpose of her book. She doesn't ask the coins whether she should have a child. It would be cheating, somehow, to confirm so directly what she, and any reader of her book, knows as soon as it begins: that she doesn't want to now, and never will. By the end of the novel, Heti is nearly forty, celebrating the coming end of her fertility with the same intensity that other women mourn the loss of theirs. "The most common human experiences—I have always longed for them so strongly," she writes. Now she is about to give one up, forever. But she feels triumphant. She has tempted fate and prevailed.

"It is so hard to conceive of making art without an audience who will eventually see it," Heti writes, early in her book. Who is the true audience for "Motherhood"? In spite of its treatise-like title, the novel can feel so inwardly directed that Heti appears to be writing only for herself. It lacks a dedication, though Heti does appear to have a particular person in mind: her mother. Born in Hungary to Holocaust survivors, she became a successful doctor and researcher, fully absorbed in her own work. She also suffered from what seems to have been a deep depression, crying at home, unavailable to her children. Heti's father picked her up from school; her classmates asked if her mother was dead. No, but she did make a habit of closing her door. Eventually, she moved out of the house, to her own apartment, filled with her books and papers. That must have been painful for Heti as a child, but it is liberating for Heti as an adult. It gives her permission to do the same—to follow in the family line. Near the end of her project, Heti writes, she sends her completed manuscript to her mother. The next day, she receives her reply: "It's magical!" Sometimes that is all a child needs to hear. ♦

BOOKS

OFFENSIVE FORMATION

Vengeance, art, and football in Sergio de la Pava's "Lost Empress."

BY JONATHAN DEE



We speak of great athletes in mythic terms, as heroes or even gods, but the truly Olympian figures in modern professional sports are probably the team owners. They move in realms we can't understand and to which we have no access. They cause mortals to enact arbitrary contests (the Patriots versus the Dolphins—what does that even mean?) for their own glory and diversion, offering, in return for those mortals' health and safety, sometimes handsome rewards and sometimes nothing. They watch from skyboxes. Their powers breed in them more impulsiveness than sagacity; they can be hotheaded, lusty, intemperate, and rivalrous, qualities for which their subjects usually pay the price.

Worthington Gill is the name of the elderly owner of the Dallas Cowboys in the alternate universe of Sergio de la Pava's third novel, "Lost Empress" (Pantheon). His children, obedient but dim Daniel and rebellious but brilliant Nina, are summoned to his lawyer's office for a Lear-like premortem division of his estate, wherein Nina does not get the one bequest she wants. She pleads with her brother: transfer ownership of the Cowboys to her, and she will forswear any claim to every other asset in the Gill empire, "your little oil wells and leveraged derivatives or whatever." His refusal is the beginning of the story rather than its end, for it turns out that, in the way of the obscenely rich, Worthington Gill owned many things that he was not even aware he owned. Nina's patrimony includes the rights to a failing franchise in the all but defunct Indoor Football League, in the similarly dormant-seeming metropolis of Paterson, New Jersey. When the N.F.L. owners lock out their players for demanding too large a share of the league's gargantuan revenue, Nina announces that the I.F.L.—with a handful of available players, seemingly no staff, and no TV contract—has been reborn and will start a sixteen-game season in the fall. In the reception area of her father's lawyer's office, she collars a delivery girl in a college sweatshirt and then introduces her to the press as the league's deputy commissioner. The episode is played for laughs, but it is also true that sometimes things are so because people like Nina Gill have the power to make them so.

Nina cares little about Paterson's gritty charms (or, presumably, its extensive literary pedigree), but, when her whim moves her attention there, so, too, moves the action of the novel. The pro-football intrigue with which the story begins is really something of a Shakespearean overlay, a sur-plot, like the wedding of the royals in "A Midsummer Night's Dream." A host of intertwined characters—mostly working class and nonwhite—makes up the novel's true community and the more self-consciously realistic thread of its narrative. De la Pava's expansive cast includes priests, 911 operators, criminal-defense lawyers, E.M.T.s, jail guards, single mothers, and fatherless children. It is also salted with the sort of slightly heightened figures for whom their author has a particular fondness, characters who perform mundane jobs with an almost superhuman talent or fervor. There is, for instance, Jorge de Cervantes, a Colombian immigrant who, late in life, discovers in himself a genius for the complicated math and "chessy maneuvering" involved in the flawless running of a Manhattan parking garage. Or Sylvester Scarpetti, the greatest, most intuitive 911-call transcriber in the history of the art, whose

De la Pava brings postmodernist style and structure to social-justice themes.

ILLUSTRATION BY ALLISON FILICE

ego starts to get the better of him as his reputation spreads. At the other end of the talent spectrum is Travis Mena, an unfortunate emergency-room resident at Bellevue, who is only a doctor at all because his father was one, and whose medical career ends after a disastrous morbidity-and-mortality conference following the death of one of his patients.

That patient, as it happens, is Jorge de Cervantes, who, while waiting at a bus stop at the end of his shift, was struck and killed by a car. In truth, there is nothing that Dr. Mena, incompetent though he is, could have done to save Jorge's life, since he arrived at the E.R. impaled by a metal beam. Still, it is Jorge's death that draws the novel's disparate figures into a sort of causal web, as those who knew him try to impose meaning on this random tragedy by turning it into a question of justice, an attempt to name the party or parties responsible and mete out punishment. After the funeral, Jorge's thirteen-year-old son, Nelson—a boy so sensitive that he titles an essay "Emily Dickinson Is Saving My Life and I Can't Even Thank Her"—is surrounded by cousins who tell him that he must avenge his father by seeing to it that the driver of the fateful car pay for Jorge's life with his own.

The cousins know just the guy for the job. He is Nuno DeAngeles, and he happens to be incarcerated at Rikers Island at the moment; so is the driver of the car. Nuno awaits trial for a crime that is initially undisclosed but is infamous enough that the other inmates and even the guards recognize his name.

Nuno, like Nina, is not conceived as a strictly realistic character. He is more akin to a superhero, an avenging angel. He has no race. He can and does kick the ass of anyone in jail who tries to cross him, but he also demands that his court-appointed lawyer bring him Musil's "The Man Without Qualities" and Sabato's "The Tunnel"—and "in the original German and Spanish like we agreed because translations are for pussies." He out-argues a Rikers chaplain on the subject of the Prodigal Son. He files his own brief with the court—reproduced in the novel in its entirety—asking for his indictment to be dismissed on account of centuries of racial prejudice in the form of slavery and the mass incarceration of people of color. In matters large and small, he takes it upon himself to determine, and to administer, justice. The crime of which he is accused turns out to be an absolute epic, a sort of moral and philosophical conundrum worked out through the medium of horrifying violence, confronting real-world genocide with vigilante law.

De la Pava himself can seem like an avenging angel, at least for those with a certain view of what ails contemporary American literature. He exists off the literary grid, which is to say that he lives in the real world and has a real job—as a public defender in the criminal courts of Manhattan. He has no M.F.A., no teaching post. The academy hasn't laid a finger on him. He self-published his first novel, "A Naked Singularity," in 2008, after eighty-eight agents turned it down. Against all odds, it found a literary audience, and when the University of Chicago Press republished it, in 2012, it received the PEN/Bingham Prize as the best début fiction of the year. Undaunted by such recognition, he self-published a second novel as well. "Lost Empress" is his first book under the aegis of a commercial publisher.

This outsider status is something of which de la Pava appears to be obliquely proud. The biographical note for "A



Naked Singularity" reads, in its entirety, "Sergio de la Pava is a writer who does not live in Brooklyn." And early in "Lost Empress" (which, in what cannot be a coincidence, is broken into eighty-eight numbered chapters) Nuno delivers a hilariously profane rant against a writer who shows up at Rikers as part of an outreach program. It seems fair to impute at least some of Nuno's energetic contempt to de la Pava himself:

> This twee fucker in a vest, the kind of douche who corrects someone calling him a writer by specifying he's a novelist. Really, fuck? Where can I pick up your intergenerational saga spanning the great panoplic expanse of the world from Connecticut all the way to Wall Street? Or your other one. You know, where the narrator's marriage dissolves over that one fateful summer in Martha's Vineyard while her daughter burgeons into womanhood? Fuck off's what I'm saying.

So does de la Pava's old-school autodidacticism mean that his work is uncontaminated by influence, something new under the literary sun? In most ways no, but in some important and thrilling ways yes. In the context of current American fiction and the directions in which it's moving, de la Pava can look like a throwback—an unabashed believer in empathy, in gigantism, in the ability of a novel to contain the whole world. (And that means the *whole* world; one of the novel's narrative threads traces the growth of a glioblastoma in a character's brain.) There is more contained in the six hundred and forty pages of "Lost Empress," formally speaking, than one review can comfortably synopsize. There are, for instance, extended, song-by-song analyses of the œuvre of Joni Mitchell. There is an exhaustive history of the 3-4 defense. The novel incorporates all sorts of documentary-style narration: transcripts of 911 calls, the New York City Department of Correction Inmate Rule Book, legal motions, lectures on the existence and nature of time, even a page of rejected Paterson city mottoes that were part of a failed rebranding effort. Would four or five mottoes have sufficed? Yes, but thirty-three is funnier.

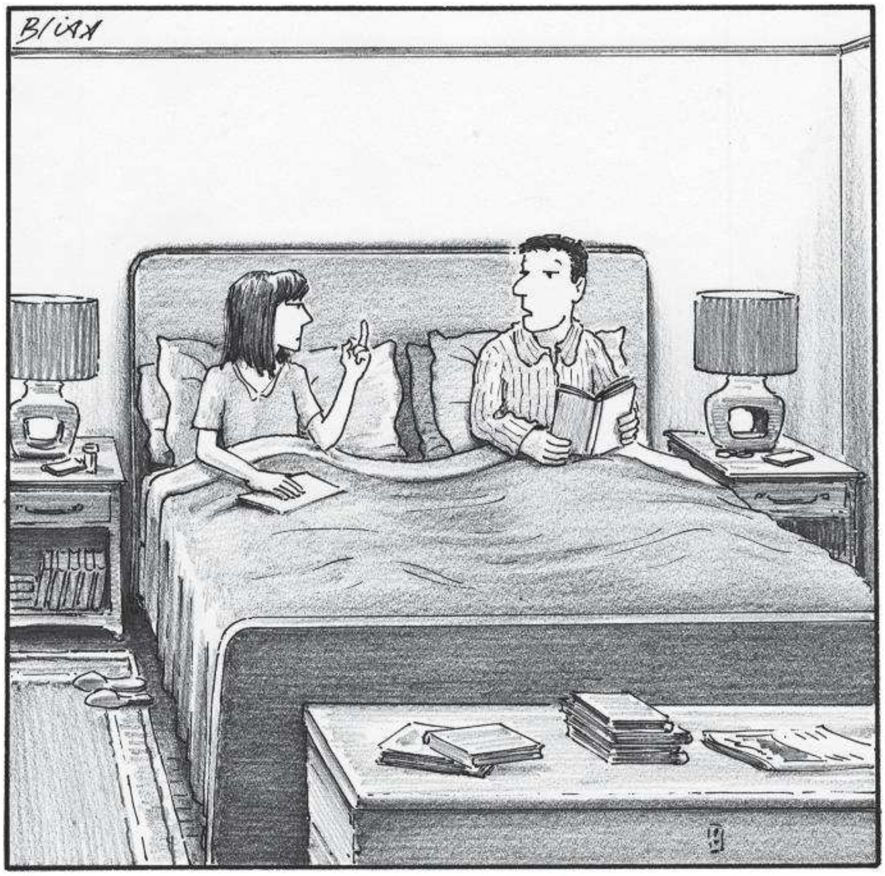
The style, of course, is the extraordinary thing, as it would need to be to unite all the elements of a novel of this length and sprawl. It is colloquial in tempo yet nerdy in content, divinely detached yet intimately casual in tone, impossibly learned and improvisational at the same time. If de la Pava has a signature move, it's to zoom out from a highly specific action or bit of characterization in order to generalize about or extrapolate from it, while still holding on to the speech-replicating sentence

structures that ground that action in a kind of conversational specificity:

> Because it turns out that human reactions to certain mildly complicated activities, like answering 911 calls for a living, disturb in their lack of significant variance. Which explains why someone interacting with an experienced 911 operator will almost certainly be struck by what seems to be their pretty blatant rudeness but is in fact just the gem the activity builds through constant, call-by-call, polish.

There are, to be sure, trace elements in "Lost Empress" of David Foster Wallace and William Gaddis and other postmodern giants. What's unusual—electrifyingly so—is to see this kind of polyphonic, self-conscious literary performance and all-stops-pulled-out postmodernist production value brought to bear on underclass lives, and on questions of social justice that tend not to penetrate the soundproofing of the ivory tower. Within its first few pages, "Lost Empress" describes itself as both "an entertainment" and "a protest," and that seems about right.

Nina Gill is quite a creation: a charismatic, uncompromising titan who dominates "Lost Empress" even during the long stretches when she is absent. Much of her thread in the novel is rendered on the page screenplay-style, nearly every line a Preston Sturges-worthy wisecrack or pun or both. If she is part vengeful goddess—sending ill-prepared men into dangerous combat in order to spite her handful of peers—she is equally a cheerful amalgam of every screwball-comedy/sports-movie cliché ever. She can outdrink you. She has rejected ten marriage proposals. Despite her heart-stopping beauty, she has a masculine affect; despite her masculine affect, she struggles to be taken seriously by the world of men. She pledges that I.F.L. revenue (should there be any) will go to the players; she has no need of it, anyway. She is always smarter than everyone else in the room, and grotesquely underestimated by the billionaire boys' club that is the N.F.L. ownership. And so we root for her, even though she is also a ruthless one-per-center with no regard for anyone's point of view or well-being but her own. We root for her even after we learn that she is aligned with a



"Something's wrong—I can tell by the way you're flipping me off."

• •

shadowy criminal syndicate known as the Absence, through which she seeks the theft of an obscure painting by Salvador Dali that languishes in, of all places, the Rikers Island jail complex. (This part of the novel is founded in unlikely fact: Dali really did donate an original painting to Rikers, where it hung for nearly forty years before it was stolen. Though guards were ultimately convicted of the theft, the painting has never been recovered.) "If you want something enough," Nina explains at one point to her de facto deputy commissioner, "you first have to identify who can procure it, easier today than ever before, then you do something that looks like asking, but a special asking that I admit can become costly."

And therein lies the inevitable connection between the novel's two poles, Nuno and Nina. For it is Nuno who has been commissioned by the Absence to steal the Dali painting—no mean feat, since it will involve not just obtaining the canvas but then breaking out of Rikers with it. If Nuno can pull this off, he will be free and rich. If he fails, he will be killed.

It's the only time when we see Nuno accept a role as a character in events and not as their architect. The theft of the Dali is in no way a matter of justice. It's not as though Nina were its rightful owner. She just wants it. But motive isn't always about free will; sometimes the Nina Gills of the world drive the action, supersede the motivation, in art as in life.

Plots themselves are a kind of justice system, whether of the literal or the poetic variety. De la Pava lets all his characters, from the priest to the lawyer to the mourning child, try to put various narrative frames around the suffering they encounter—their own or others'—as a way of making that suffering signify. He does this even as he points out the relativity of "justice" itself: viewed from afar, or, indeed, from up close, all lives pursue the same path and meet the same end anyway. Take the case of the driver who killed Jorge:

> Let the punishment fit the crime is a thing, right? But with so many blameless people being punished, and severely, worrying about proportionality for this guy seems dumb. The worst things imaginable can happen to this guy for no reason at all without violating any natural law. What then is allowable where such ample justification exists? Why then not allow the universe to dispassionately handle this question of justice? That's what it does....

One needs to adopt, in other words, a particular squint in order to detect the workings of "justice" at all. This accounts, in a philosophical sort of way, for de la Pava's explicit embrace of the principles of screwball comedy—specifically, its reliance on the idea of coincidence. In a world in which every single horrible outcome eventually can and will happen, how are you going to complain about a plot seeming unlikely?

Which brings us back to football. "Lost Empress" joins a long roster of literary meditations on the meaning of the game. You could draw a line backward to Don DeLillo's "End Zone" and Robert Coover's "Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?," though it would also have to pass through pop-culture baubles like "Remember the Titans," "Any Given Sunday," "North Dallas Forty"—pretty much every post-Vietnam football movie ever made.

Why should the postmodernists be so drawn to the gridiron? It seems like an odd attraction. Football is ripe for satire, of course, with its undisguised militarism, its unfamiliarity with the language of irony, its Lombardi-esque moral elevation of stakes that are, in the end, imaginary. De la Pava is certainly interested in the workings of the human brain, and that offers a timely thematic link to big-time football, in which human brains are considered a kind of depreciation expense. It is also true that the novel's two main fields of inquiry—professional football and the criminal-justice system—both profit hugely from exploiting the bodies of men of color. But de la Pava never really goes there, although Nina does recruit one player directly from the gates of Attica. Financial gain, to her, is incidental. What she's after—what she's willing to trade her

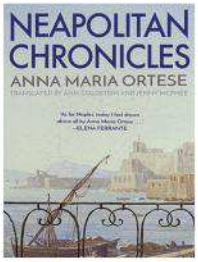
wealth for, in fact—is creative control.

Ultimately, football, just like the rest of the sports-entertainment complex, enacts a very postmodern battle between narrative closure and narrative chaos. "The overwhelming majority of people devote their energies to endeavors that have no clear-cut winners or losers, no scores," Nina tells the members of her team before the season opener. "Part of what that means is they can fool themselves if they have to. You won't have that luxury. . . . Every Sunday a score will be created and it will tell you your worth as a craftsman. At the end this team will have a record and it will tell you even more. That's why you win a championship, to know that about yourself."

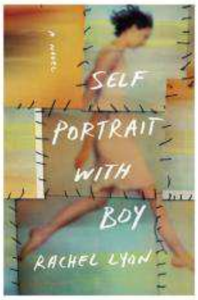
Contrast this with the lives of the novel's less powerful characters, and the fervor with which they try to turn incident—the death of Jorge de Cervantes—into plot by their efforts to identify and punish the guilty. It would be wrong to say that their efforts get them nowhere, but the places their efforts get them have little or nothing to do with their own will or with the moral or narrative control they are trying to exert upon the determining events of their lives. Nelson's cousins cry out for eye-for-an-eye retribution. Dr. Mena's superiors blame him for his lack of agency. The E.M.T. who treated Jorge tries to contact his widow to report his last words, thinking that they must be significant. As for Nuno's quest to put the whole world right, it consists of some losses and some victories, which to him is pretty much the same as no victory at all.

The only figure in "Lost Empress" who can make human events cohere in a morally comprehensible way is Nina Gill. She is such a deity in her world that she makes the weather: despite the fact that all I.F.L. games are played indoors, before each game something called the Weather Wheel is spun to create artificial blizzards, rainstorms, extreme winds, etc., within the arena, inappropriately dressed spectators be damned. In the end, Nina engineers exactly the championship game she wants. That's why she knew from the beginning which of her father's holdings was the prize. An oil well is just an asset, but a football team is a story. ♦

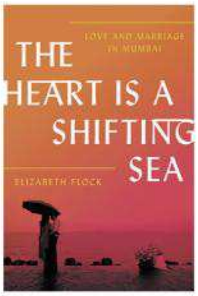
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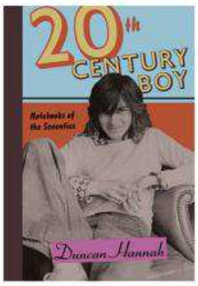
Neapolitan Chronicles, *by Anna Maria Ortese, translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein and Jenny McPhee (New Vessel).* Elena Ferrante has cited Ortese (1914-98) as one of her greatest influences, and the connections are obvious in this collection of short stories and essays, which infuse a grimy, chaotic Naples with unsentimental menace rather than romantic mystique. Ortese gathers concrete details about the realities of poverty, and, like Ferrante, delineates moments of status tension with blunt accuracy. The narrator of "The Silence of Reason" encounters an old literary friend and describes his presence in the room as "an abyss, a chasm full of hands clapping, which created a desolate sound, an endless sigh." The story's skewering of Neapolitan intellectuals caused such an outrage that Ortese had to leave the city.



Self-Portrait with Boy, *by Rachel Lyon (Scribner).* "There is nothing more pathetic than being the only person who believes in you," says the protagonist of this début novel set in 1991, an aspiring photographer, broke and squatting in an unrenovated loft. Each day, she takes a self-portrait, and in the background of one she accidentally captures a nine-year-old boy falling to his death. She recognizes the photograph as a "masterpiece" that can propel her from poverty into the art world, but, after growing close to the boy's grieving mother, she feels torn about capitalizing on the tragedy. Lyon frames the choice as one of self-definition: Must one be ruthless to be an artist?



The Heart Is a Shifting Sea, *by Elizabeth Flock (Harper).* Following the intimate lives of three married couples from different religious and ethnic backgrounds in India for many years, Flock writes of exchanged love letters, sexual embarrassments, financial strains, family fights, and gradual distancings. One marriage was arranged, one began with an elopement, and one was a match made over the Internet. But each of them is shaped by Mumbai, where the couples settle, and by the pressures of middle-class life. The city and upward mobility bring freedom, but family demands and moments of political upheaval leave Flock's subjects struggling to choose between individual desire and social expectation. In her telling, marriage and Mumbai are in synch, changing in unexpected and revealing ways.



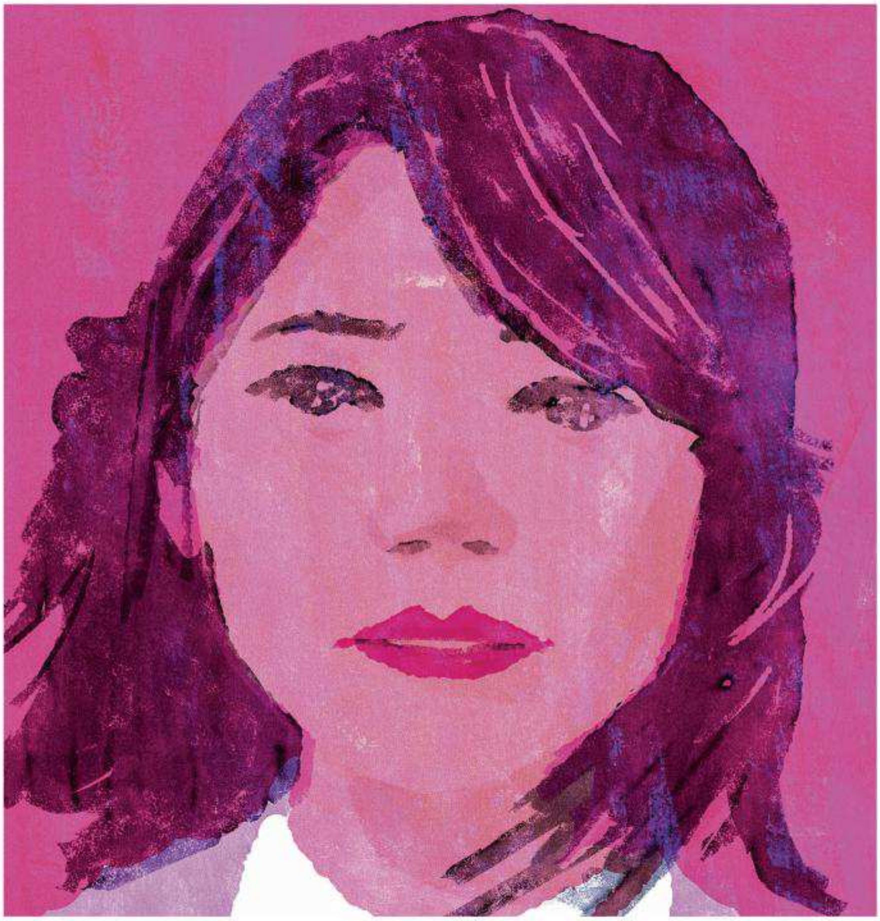
Twentieth-Century Boy, *by Duncan Hannah (Knopf).* Arriving in New York in 1973, the Minneapolis-born painter Duncan Hannah quickly immersed himself in the downtown art-and-music scene. These journal entries from the time chronicle young adulthood and a phantasmagoria of alcohol, sex, art, conversation, glam rock, and New Wave cinema. Hannah's writing combines self-aware humor with an intoxicating punk energy. Gregarious and game, he seems to know everyone; at one point, he winds up in a limo bound for a drag club with Andy Warhol, Bryan Ferry, and David Bowie. Somehow, by the end of the book, he's become a real artist. "The trick is to live as if you're going to die, and then not die," he writes.

BOOKS

THE HUNGRY I

Jenny Xie's poetry offers a sightseer's guide to the self.

BY DAN CHIASSON



Xie captures the pain of failing as an envoy between languages and cultures.

The title of Jenny Xie's début poetry collection, "Eye Level" (Graywolf), is a pair of palindromes. You realize this only after you've gone a little nuts staring at the book's cover, and of course the effect cannot be reproduced in speech. Two common words in a familiar English idiom wouldn't normally attract this sort of pattern analysis: it's not how we tend to read. But the phrase "eye level," encountered at eye level, detains you in pleasant consideration of its intriguing, perhaps meaningless, symmetries. This is a book about the necessity of toggling between the enchantments of the page and the allure of the horizon: Xie's "appetite for elsewhere" competes with a longing for the "infinite places within language to hide." The poems dazzle in their local details, even as they pine for global reach and scale: "You'll wreck your eyesight poring over pages in low light," Xie writes, recalling one of the "Old Wives' Tales on Which I Was Fed," "but looking at all things green from a distance can coax it back."

Xie, who was born in China and raised in New Jersey, teaches at N.Y.U. "Eye Level," published after winning the Walt Whitman Award of the Academy of American Poets, is a book partly about living and travelling abroad, with dispatches from Hanoi, Phnom Penh, Corfu, and other "distances" which, encountered up close, dissolve in a blur of commotion. You can travel far from home and still be stuck with yourself, as poets at least since Horace have known. Yet the basis of Xie's work is a solitude distinct from loneliness. "When I can no longer keep dividing," she writes, in "Solitude Study," "the odds are in my favor to strike it out alone." Odd numbers are not evenly divisible: the self is the remainder left over when the mind is "uncluttered with others." Like the nifty palindrome effect of her title, this conceit is something between a game and an insight, a self-amusement that defines the isolation that gave rise to it. In "Rootless," a sleepy train ride in Vietnam between Hanoi and Sapa is an occasion for descriptive ingenuity: "Hours ago, I crossed a motorbike with a hog strapped to its seat,/the size of a date pit from a distance." The word "crossed" suggests some creepy genetics experiment, as though Xie's imagination had bred motorcycles and swine. But the resulting image, a "date pit," takes shape only when a third, objective element, "distance," is introduced. Rootless though rooted in her seat, Xie, the only constant in a changing landscape, is chagrined to find that she is also its only standard of measurement: "Me? I'm just here in my traveler's clothes, trying on each passing town for size." Though she's the one "passing," the towns get assigned the adjective. Xie comes across as a magician of perspective and scale, troubled by her own virtuosic illusions.

Through Xie's eyes, we can see the binds and paradoxes of being stuck inside a single point of view. When you're at eye level with another person, however, you can be briefly prodded out of solipsism: you see yourself being seen. This split in consciousness requires alternating curiosity and caution, as you pass, in the instant, from being the voyeur to being the spectacle. The book's epigraph, from the Spanish poet Antonio Machado, suggests the problem: "The eye you see is not/an eye because you see it;/it is an eye because it sees you." Xie, I sense, could go on forever playing mental solitaire, but a keen ethical imperative always kicks in, directing her imagination to consider how she is herself

ILLUSTRATION BY TATSURO KIUCHI

imagined. Such self-interrogation never occurs to her fellow-tourists, who "curate vacation stories, / days summed up in a few lines," and who forget "how banality / accrues with no visual evidence." But Xie, conscious that her own style likewise compresses vast swaths of experience into "a few lines," does not exclude herself from the critique. The ironies of her shifting positions, as a Chinese immigrant in America and as a Chinese-American travelling through Asia, saturate a passage from "Phnom Penh Diptych: Dry Season." Xie finds herself sweating "over plates of pork dumplings and watery beer" in a Chinese restaurant:

> *Can you fix this English?*
> the Chinese restaurant owner asks,
> pushing a menu toward me.
>
> The men here chew toothpicks like uncles
> on both sides of my family.
> They talk with their mouths full.
>
> I translate what little I can, it's
> embarrassing.
>
> *Just passing through?*
> asks his eldest daughter, as she turns
> to the fan.

The task of translation dogs Xie's art, as well as her life. Are those bits of English dialogue reported verbatim, or translated from the owner's and his daughter's Chinese? "I translate what little I can, it's embarrassing": the shame corresponds to Xie's predicament in the restaurant and, equally, her plight on the page. She must "fix" her poems, recorded in English but reaching for global meanings, to convey the pain of failing as an envoy between languages and cultures.

For Xie, the disintegrations of travel can be mended—"fixed"—in her work, where scattered impressions are gathered up into formal and rhetorical wholes. Xie's diary-like sequences cut from scene to scene without intervening narrative, like a map on which each city "is a wrist-width away from the last." They scramble time in an analogous fashion: "Someone once told me, *before and after is just another false binary*," Xie writes, her deadpan tone suggesting that this isn't news to her. In "Fortified," a bit of roadside kitsch in Greece suggests her poems' elegiac methods of mixing up arrivals and departures:

> On the bus ride back,
> we pass a store named Ni Hao, selling pelts.
> *Hello* in all directions.

The poet travelling to new places carries inside her a memory of old ones, and, even deeper down, vestiges of childhood, like those "uncles" who suddenly come to mind in the Chinese restaurant. Xie spoke Mandarin at home and learned English in school; that banal "Hello" sign, aimed at the Chinese tourist, stands in for the inextricable weave of greeting and parting that makes up Xie's emotional landscape. It also stands, I think, for something essential about poems, which exist, as John Ashbery said, in "a recurring wave of arrival." The vivid family ghosts conjured in poems like "Lineage," where Xie's mother works "a steamed pot of land," or "Metamorphosis," when she "trades the pad of a stethoscope for a dining room spatula," have disappeared in life but can still take shape—and feel new—on the page.

"The present tense gets close, but doesn't enter me," Xie writes—although, ever invested in paradox, she proclaims this in the present tense. In "Naturalization," the use of the present to depict the past creates narrative immediacy. "It is 1992," Xie writes, describing the yard sales and change purses she recalls from childhood. I felt some of the same elation I experience when, in "The Day Lady Died," Frank O'Hara announces, "It is 1959." It's a magic trick Xie accomplishes with a few simple-seeming maneuvers, easy to foul up, but profound when successfully executed.

"Eye Level," with worldly landmarks and private discoveries, mapped routes and circuitous thoughts, suggests a kind of Fodor's or Lonely Planet guide to inner life. Travel books often come with helpful phrases in the local tongue; Xie's equivalent, I think, is found in the many memorable and quotable maxims that she coins in the course of these poems. From her past, a chorus of ancestral voices still echoes with old superstitions and customs: "Sleeping on your back will flatten your head's shape"; "Eating the fat inside the crab sharpens the mind, / So too with roe extracted from steamed fish." The tone of these maxims is borrowed for the haunting but often deliberately ambiguous adages that Xie fashions herself: "If you stay long enough, / the heat's fingers will touch everything / and the imprint will sting." Many pages of this book yield such mottoes—the epigraphs, I predict, of many slim volumes in the future. Some of the best are concentrated in "Visual Orders," a proverb-poem in unnumbered sections that reads like personal scripture. A passage contemplates the inevitable "I"/"eye" pun that undergirds much of the book:

> The acquisitive, insatiable *I*.
> A disembodied eye cannot be confined
> to the skin and to what it holds captive.
>
> Inversely, to be unseen against one's will
> is to be powerless.
> To be denied a reflection and to be locked
> out of a self.

The language itself is levelled here—Xie's gift for striking imagery withheld—in order to give her precepts heft and authority. Some of these "orders" are self-injunctions that inform Xie's verbal mimesis, as though it could be governed by the principles of the visual arts:

> To draw ink-lines across the lids
> To dip into small pots of pigment
> To brush two-dozen times
> To flush with water and tame with oil
> To refrain and to spill in appropriate
> measure
> To drink from the soft and silvery pane
> To extract the root of the solitary
> so as to appear

The writing of poetry is notoriously mystified, almost occult in its resistance to rules or step-by-step methods. If you're a poet, the precision, discipline, and tact of painters or photographers seem enviable indeed. The entire process, by being externalized, seems repeatable, unlike the chance encounters of poets with their muses. Xie's swallowed commands, shorn of their predicates, suggest that the rules of her art cannot be codified. Xie knows the truth of what Wallace Stevens said about the power of poems: supplementing the manifest world with innuendo and nuance, supplying sound to spectacle, they make "the visible / a little hard to see." What happens at eye level gets its start in the depths. ♦

THE THEATRE

FROZEN

Hiding from life in "The Iceman Cometh."

BY HILTON ALS

Although there are many performers in George C. Wolfe's staging of Eugene O'Neill's phenomenal 1946 four-act and nearly four-hour drama, "The Iceman Cometh" (now in revival at the Bernard B. Jacobs), there is only one actor, and his name is Austin Butler. Most performers want to be seen at any cost, but actors—at least, those as good as Butler—are both determined and relaxed in their ambition to do justice to the playwright's text while contributing to the life of the story. Butler, making his Broadway début as Don Parritt, an eighteen-year-old lost boy who takes up residence at Harry Hope's dive bar and hotel on Manhattan's Lower West Side, illustrates, the moment he takes the stage, the difference between the two. Tall, with fair hair and light-colored eyes, he conveys, through economy of movement and facial expression, what many of his castmates try to show by shouting and grandstanding: his character's inner life.

It's the summer of 1912, a couple of years before the start of the Great War. The object of Don's admiration is Larry Slade (David Morse), a handsome and well-built sixty-year-old who has lived at Harry's for what feels like a long time. Although Larry spends half his waking hours at the bottom of a bottle, he hasn't gone soft in the middle—or in the mind. The rotgut he swills does little to sweeten his jaundiced outlook on life. When the curtain rises, he's the only patron who's even half awake at Harry's, which is populated by the lowest of the low—dipsomaniacs, they used to be called. Sprawled across wooden tables and chairs, Larry and his fellow-drinkers look like shipwrecked creatures in a murky sea. (Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer's lighting is thick with atmosphere, sometimes too thick.) Larry is ruminating with the bartender, Rocky Pioggi (Danny McCarthy), who has a little side business: he's a pimp, but he doesn't like being called one; the label doesn't fit his conception of himself. And that's the rub of life, isn't it—that we exist somewhere between who we really are and how we'd like to be perceived?

Certainly, Larry feels that way, though it's sometimes hard to understand what he's saying, as Morse lays on what must be someone's idea of turn-of-the-century New Yorkese. (The majority of the cast is similarly affected. And the acoustics of Santo Loquasto's awkward, voice-muffling set don't help.) When Larry says he'll pay for his drinks tomorrow, he knows he's lying, but there's no comfort in the truth. What he and his barmates share is a belief in the redemptive quality of fantasy: it keeps you from yourself, whoever that may be—you can figure it out tomorrow. Larry says to Rocky, of his pals, "They've all a touching credulity concerning tomorrows. It'll be a great day for them, tomorrow—the Feast of All Fools, with brass bands playing!" Carried away by the hooch, he adds:

> Their ships will come in, loaded to the gunwales with cancelled regrets and promises fulfilled and clean slates and new leases! . . . What's it matter if the truth is that their favoring breeze has the stink of nickel whiskey on its breath, and their sea is a growler of lager and ale, and their ships are long since looted and scuttled and sunk on the bottom? To hell with the truth!

Alcohol isn't the only thing that gets Larry going. He's a moralist, the play's Greek chorus. But he's grown weary of his sense of right and wrong in a world where no one else distinguishes between the two. Drinking helps him construct lyrics in the air. (As with all the fascinating male characters in O'Neill's late plays—from the cast of his beautiful, ghastly chamber drama "Long Day's Journey Into Night" to Jim in "A Moon for the Misbegotten"—getting high frees the poet within.) Still, it was Larry's strong ethics, and his kindness, that Don loved as a kid. Larry was his mother's boyfriend back then; they were anarchists. Now Don, stuck between boyhood and manhood, has come looking for answers. He betrayed his mother, but did she deserve it—or was his betrayal a way of holding on to Larry, whom he sees as his only hope for redemption?

Most of the cast could have taken a hint from Michael Emerson, who was unforgettable as Willie Oban, the Harvard law student turned drunk, in the 1999 Broadway production, when he said, "Drunks of long standing don't display the intoxicated mannerisms you see in bad plays. . . . Our drunks are in their natural state, and it takes a lot to get them



 ILLUSTRATION BY JOÃO FAZENDA

staggering or slurring." But Butler's look of expectation, need, and guilt—his hands pulling slightly at his trousers as the men wait for their friend Theodore Hickman, or Hickey (Denzel Washington), a travelling salesman, to turn up and share a laugh about the outside world—illuminated things about the play that I hadn't understood before, despite having read it and seen it many times. The way Butler conveyed Don's tentativeness and his nuanced speech made it clear to me that the character was a stand-in for the playwright's younger self—that striking boy, consumed by destructive, loving thoughts about his own troubled, morphine-addicted mother.

That realization led to another: many of the characters—from the broken-down British officer Cecil Lewis (Frank Wood) and the dilapidated Piet Wetjoen (Dakin Matthews) to Willie (Neal Huff), who drinks, in part, to forget how he has failed his father—inhabit the same story about masculinity, in which Hickey stars as the ultimate fantasy: a nonjudgmental dad. Of course everyone loves Hickey; he's a salesman who knows how to sell your dreams back to you. When he arrives this time, however, he lacks his usual brio, and he isn't interested in sharing lies; he wants the men to face the truth not only of who they are but of what they might do beyond these walls. (The only bar patrons who move between Harry's and the outside world with any frequency are three prostitutes, including Cora, played by Tammy Blanchard, who exposes many wounds in a role that's often buried under stereotypical tart behavior—lots of squealing and high-pitched antics.) Hickey wants to know what life would be like if stripped of male bravado and self-deception. What his friends don't notice, because their expectations far exceed their grasp on reality, is that, behind his huckster's smile, he is descending into madness. The son of a preacher, he knows that Jesus is a con, too, so why can't he be the world's—or his world's—savior?

"The Iceman Cometh" is really a novel in speech, and, as with the works of James Joyce, another Irishman in love with language and play, it takes repeated readings and viewings to find the humor mixed in with the disillusionment. Start with the title, which is a reference to Hickey's joke about his wife getting it on with the iceman while he's out of town. If the iceman cometh, that means he has cum, and what's done is done. But you won't necessarily get the subtleties of O'Neill's language, those incredible flights upward and then down into the gutter, in this production, because so much of the talk is sacrificed to incomprehensible diction and to keeping the action going.

Nothing happens in "The Iceman Cometh." Then again, everything happens, as Hickey tries to exorcise damage. But what if damage is who you are? The play was first produced thirteen years after Nathanael West published "Miss Lonelyhearts," another tale about a guy with a Christ complex, and I wonder how much O'Neill drew on that novel when he was shaping Hickey, who personifies the insanity of errant machismo, at once broken and self-glorifying. In his stage work, Washington has sometimes risked letting unpleasantness—a kind of pushiness and inconsolability—show, as he did when playing Troy Maxson, in the 2010 revival of August Wilson's "Fences." But Hickey requires something both more and less than that—a searching, lost quality masquerading as a certainty that he himself can't define. The other big problem with Washington's performance is that there's no madness in him. He gets some of Hickey's church rhythms right, but he uses them to sound more black and less O'Neill. When his Hickey speaks, at the end of the play, of how intolerable his wife's love was to him, he isn't consumed by sickening guilt and the stink of his shitty nerves; instead, he sits back in his chair, putting his jacket on, then taking it off again, like a star doing what he has to do to remind audiences that, after all, he has won two Oscars. It's always a pity when an actor cynically sticks to what he knows will work and leaves it at that. It's an ungenerous impulse not to try harder than one has to, and it pinches the spectator's heart. But Butler is the opposite of cynical. He wants to do right by O'Neill, his director, and his fellow-players. And, no matter how much they bray around him, he stands his ground, reacting to what may be pure in them, as performers, with his own purity, the wellspring of his work, which is that of a potentially great artist. ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

CAVALCADE

"Avengers: Infinity War" and "Let the Sunshine In."

BY ANTHONY LANE



Joe and Anthony Russo's film draws characters from across the Marvel universe.

What is the collective noun for superheroes? An immodesty of superheroes, perhaps? A bluster, a cluster bomb, a swank? Somebody ought to settle the issue soon, if we're going to be showered with films like "Avengers: Infinity War." It has two directors, Joe and Anthony Russo, and characters from every corner of the Marvel firmament. From the top: Iron Man (Robert Downey, Jr.), Spider-Man (Tom Holland), Black Panther (Chadwick Boseman), Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson), Captain America (Chris Evans), Doctor Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch), Falcon (Anthony Mackie), Hulk (Mark Ruffalo), Thor (Chris Hemsworth), Gamora (Zoe Saldana), Nebula (Karen Gillan), Peter Quill (Chris Pratt), Drax (Dave Bautista), Loki (Tom Hiddleston), Wanda the Scarlet Witch (Elizabeth Olsen), and her even redder boyfriend, Vision (Paul Bettany). Apologies if I've left anyone out. Among those *not* appearing in the movie, as far as I could tell, are Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Dorothy, Scarecrow, Rin Tin Tin, and Shaggy from "Scooby-Doo."

There's also no sign of Frodo Baggins—bizarre, given how much of the movie is pilfered from "The Lord of the Rings." There are six Infinity Stones, scattered about the cosmos, or yours for just $19.99 if you buy direct from QVC. One stone is set within a pendant that hangs fetchingly around Doctor Strange's neck; another is stored within the Tesseract, a glowing cube that cries out for a mega-sized gin-and-tonic; a third is wedged in Vision's forehead; and so on. The aim of the game is to collect all six stones, and the principal player is Thanos (Josh Brolin), a meaty brute with a chin that would make Kirk Douglas run away and hide. As Thanos obtains each stone, he pops it into a handy hole in his gauntlet, and soon there is only one stone left to trace; if he can complete the set, he will be master of time, space, reality, and other covetable whatnots. Having once slotted five of the six colored wedges into place, during an intensive session of Trivial Pursuit, I know just how Thanos feels.

The obvious task for Iron Man and the gang (basically, the Avengers plus the Guardians of the Galaxy) is to halt Thanos in his thunderous tracks. It's a gig that means plenty of planet-hopping, with the adventurers racking up the space miles, and the Russos are canny enough, toward the end, to stage an epic battle in Wakanda, the African utopia that was unveiled in "Black Panther." At stake, as ever, is the fate of the universe. Why must it always be the universe? What's wrong with the fate of Hackensack? Doesn't anyone care what happens to South Dakota, or Denmark, or Peru? I would think better of Captain America, say, if he had a cat named Smudge, which needed saving before anything else, but no. All that seems to matter is the entirety of creation—something that nobody, apart from gods and show ponies, should bother to fret about.

The person who prophesied this film, more than a century ago, is Freud. In 1914, he wrote, "Even dire criminals and comic heroes captivate us within the context of the arts by dint of the narcissistic rigor with which they keep at bay anything tending to diminish their ego." Exactly. Iron Man in a nutshell. Or Thanos. And don't even get me started on Doctor Strange, whose rigor extends to the curve described by his cowlick. I was as pumped as the next fan when I read the cast list of the film, and yet, in the event, it suffers from the same uneasy bonhomie that infects every supergroup. All-star spectacle it may be, but it's still like listening to two and a half hours of Tin Machine.

The *Wall Street Journal* estimates that "Avengers: Infinity War" cost three hundred million dollars, and the result is not a movie so much as a heap of broken images. The plot consists of bits: a fiery slugfest, a pause for bonding, a quick weep, and a patch of jokey repartee, before the slugging returns. Acts of sacrifice are dotted throughout, and we are urged to applaud the burgeoning fellowship of those who unite against Thanos, but, in truth, it's every man for himself. Or, in the case of Groot (Vin Diesel), every tree. There were times, as the audience was hollering around me, with Marvel mania in full spate, that I felt like a mourner at the graveside of cinema. Hence the most moving scene in the film, when various people are blown away—not shot or blasted but sifted and dispersed, dust

ILLUSTRATION BY KRISTIAN HAMMERSTAD

to dust, and swiftly gone with the wind. It's a sad sight, but sadder still is my premonition: they'll be back.

The films of Claire Denis are filled with dance. Dressed in drag, the protagonist of "I Can't Sleep" (1994) revolves and sways, alone, as if obeying not the music but some inaudible private beat. The finale of Denis's masterpiece, "Beau Travail" (1999), consists of a French Foreign Legionnaire hurling himself around, in a Dionysian craze, to Corona's "The Rhythm of the Night." (He's off duty, you will be relieved to hear, and clad in civilian clothes. No one can caper in a képi.) The dancing in "35 Shots of Rum" (2008) becomes a relaxing relay; one couple holds each other close, only for the woman to make way for a second woman, whose partner is then replaced by another man. And, in the new Denis movie, "Let the Sunshine In," an artist named Isabelle (Juliette Binoche) meets a stranger—tall, dark, and handsome, in that beaten-mongrel French way—on the dance floor of a bar. Exchanging not a word, they introduce themselves with an embrace, as the room resounds to Etta James. "At last, my love has come along," she sings. "My lonely days are over." If only.

The movie mounts a quest, only partially successful, against the forces of solitude. The opening scene, for example, shows Isabelle having sex with a bearded banker, Vincent (Xavier Beauvois), a porky sort who is finding it difficult, let us say, to complete his current transaction. "*Allez, allez!*" she urges him, which really doesn't help. Later in the story, once she has discarded the banker, she reveals that the only thing that guaranteed *her* bliss, in bed with him, was to muse on what a bastard he was. Whatever turns you on.

Vincent is one in a list of unreliable males. Isabelle neither seduces them nor succumbs to them; she simply falls in with them, like someone adjusting to changes in the weather. The list includes an actor (Nicolas Duvauchelle), who boozes deeply, drives her home, then prepares to leave but eventually stays, only to request that, at their next encounter, they should *not* have sex. "This isn't a love thing," he says. Always nice to have that clarified. Isabelle also sleeps with her ex-husband, François (Laurent Grévill), more from force of habit than from desire. Then, there's Fabrice (Bruno Podalydès), who, to his disbelief, fails to lure Isabelle at all. In what may qualify as the Frenchest exchange in modern cinema, he asks her, "Are you in love now?" and she says no. "When not in love, what do you do?" he asks. "I do nothing," she replies.

Binoche is everywhere in this story. As in "Three Colors: Blue" (1993) and "The English Patient" (1996), she delivers a rich portrait of a restless heart, steeped in earthiness and radiance alike. At a restaurant, she laughs with her mouth full of food, an indignity from which many actors might shrink, yet there are also moments when she melts, as if in the warmth of the title. After the actor has left, Isabelle leans against the wall of her Paris apartment and says out loud, to herself, "*C'est merveilleux.*" You can hear the local echoes; Gene Kelly, in "An American in Paris" (1951), and Fred Astaire, in "Funny Face" (1957), both found love in France and, with a little help from Gershwin, told us all about it with a tune—" 'S wonderful, 's marvellous," they sang. But their grins were as wide as their hopes were secure, whereas Isabelle is prey to sudden squalls of tears and craven entreaties. "Stay with me, please," she says to one guy. Binoche is the least plaintive of performers, and it's galling to see her beg.

"Let the Sunshine In" is said to be loosely based on Roland Barthes's "A Lover's Discourse"—very loosely, I would argue, in the same way that "The Texas Chain Saw Massacre" was based on a branch of Home Depot. As for Claire Denis, anybody new to her methods will be addled by her breaking and stretching of the rules. Isabelle has a daughter, for instance, but we glimpse her for less than ten seconds. Hands are granted almost as many closeups as faces. And such is the movie's nagging insistence on the primacy of our romantic selves—rather than our professional or political ones—that some characters are caught in mid-malaise before we even grasp who they are. One hulking fellow, played by Gérard Depardieu, is first sighted sitting in a car, as an unidentified woman breaks up with him. He then gets out and murmurs to himself, "How could I have believed in it?" We know nothing about him, except that he's in despair. Subsequently, he turns out to be a psychic, of all things, and proceeds to talk of love, at length, over the closing credits. All this may infuriate you, or strike you as endearingly odd, but, consider, it could have been so much more distressing. Depardieu could have started to dance. ♦

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Richard Brody blogs about movies.

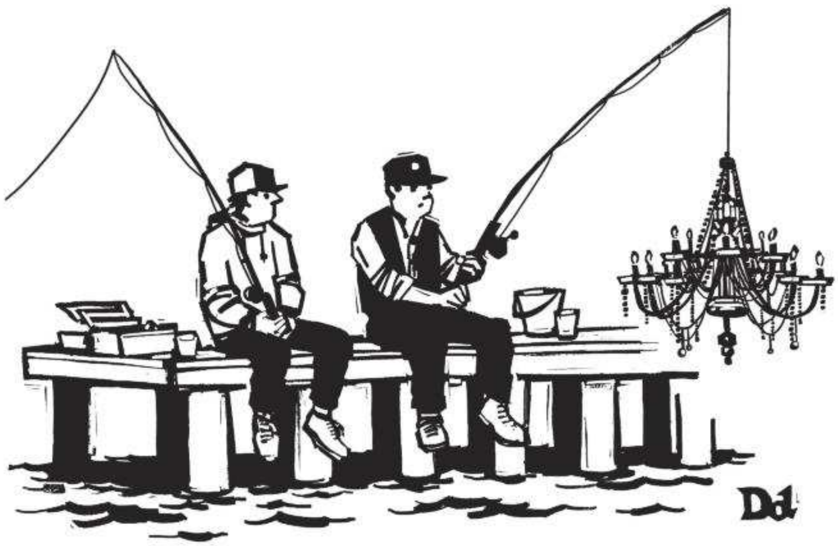
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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Drew Dernavich, must be received by Sunday, May 6th. The finalists in the April 23rd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the May 21st issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

THE FINALISTS

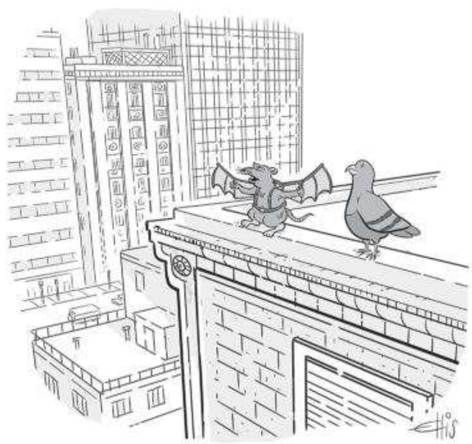


"If you want to see a giraffe, we're going to need a lot more information."
Brian Mazmanian, Belmont, Mass.

"I warn you, my partner doesn't have my sense of humor."
Soledad Liquori, Minneapolis, Minn.

"Start talking or we bring in the mime."
Tony Spurlock, Rio Rancho, N.M.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"I told your parents I would convert."
Catherine Jacobs, New York City